

ONE

Introduction

AS I LOOKED AROUND the table on “training day” at my new job in the low-wage service industry, it was hard to imagine that much worker solidarity could exist. Like the motel and hotel workers that help comprise the low-wage service sector across the United States, the workforce at MJE’s was quite diverse (Adler and Adler 2004; Newman 1999).¹ George, an African American male nearly seven feet tall sat next to Kristin, a petite Latina. Across from them was John, a white male, and Tong, a Vietnamese immigrant. Mary and Jean, both female, sat along the wall: Mary is African American and Jean is white.

Prevailing wisdom indicates that such demographic diversity inhibits political solidarity among the working poor (Wilson 1999; Sugrue 1995). According to this view, the working poor rarely feel much solidarity with one another when it comes to politics (Goldner 2003; Schlozman and Verba 1979). Demographic diversity and the cross-cutting allegiances that subsequently emerge along racial, ethnic, and/or gender lines are at least partly to blame (Lipset and Marks 2001; Mason and Yates 2001; Higham 1993; Huckfeldt and Kohfeldt 1989). Back at MJE’s training session table, this means that if George were to take an interest in politics, he might be too concerned with the plight of other African Americans to connect with his fellow workers. He might even distrust workers who are not African American and possibly feel prejudiced against them. Kristin would focus on the interests of other Latinas, and possibly distrust workers who are not Latino and/or female. John would concern himself with how whites are doing and Tong’s Vietnamese identity would be all-encompassing. John might even subsequently discriminate against nonwhite workers, and Tong could find it difficult to relate to workers who are not immigrants from his home region. If politically attuned, Mary and Jean would downplay their “worker” identity in favor of their respective racial and/or gender identities. From there, it would not be much of a leap for

Mary and Jean to believe that competition exists among workers along racial and/or gender lines.

This read on the training room table illustrates the classic take on diversity, identity, and solidarity among the working poor. According to this view, a main reason for the lack of politicized worker solidarity in the United States is that workers emphasize gender, racial, ethnic, and other identities at the *expense* of their “worker” identity. These other attachments crowd out attention to shared worker identities and may produce feelings of distrust, competition, and prejudice across demographic group lines. In other words, identity politics suppress worker solidarity.

This is not to say that identity politics are the only factor undermining worker solidarity or that the working poor believe that this identity and other identities related to it are irrelevant for politics. If asked to place themselves within a social class, the workers around the training session table almost certainly would have said “working class” (Zweig 2000). Under certain circumstances, this placement probably would influence their political thoughts and behaviors (Cramer-Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker 2004). But believing oneself to be working class is not the same as feeling political solidarity with others in this group. Most of those who are working and poor in America may regard themselves as “working class,” but they remain ambivalent about what this means for politics (Devine 1992; Jackman and Jackman 1983) and seem to lack political solidarity with others who are similarly situated (Gerteis and Savage 1998; Schlozman and Verba 1979). It is as an explanation for this lack of worker solidarity that identity politics receive so much attention.²

Thus, the classic take on the working poor and solidarity is not that social class is irrelevant for politics; rather, it is that worker solidarity is rare in the United States and that the heightened connections workers feel with those of their same race, ethnicity, and/or gender are often to blame, given the diverse demographic characteristics among them. This commonly held view is at odds with much of what I saw the workers at MJE’s saying and doing. As the initial training session day turned into almost a year of fieldwork, I observed many workers engaging in risk-taking behavior to help one another. They did so across a wide range of demographic lines.

Sokhar, for example, took much pride in his ethnic heritage and described the discrimination he faced because of it. He was willing to clock in another employee who was running late, even though the employee was relatively unpopular and from a different demographic group, and Sokhar’s own job and citizenship status would be jeopardized if he were caught. The kitchen staff, a diverse group themselves, even helped Sokhar “cover” when managers asked where the late employee was.³

Cooks, all of whom spoke English, expressed solidarity with dishwashers, who rarely spoke English. The hotel rule was that dishwashers were not allowed to sit while on the job and had to engage in janitorial tasks when

there were no dishes to be cleaned. The cooks had a better vantage point to spot an approaching manager and would bang on the wall in a distinctive pattern to alert the dishwasher if she or he was resting on the crate kept hidden under the sink. The cooks and dishwashers were not immediately dependent on one another and could not speak to one another with ease.⁴ Nonetheless, a system of solidarity developed between many of them. As one worker told me, "You don't have to talk to feel close."

Even casual conversations revealed political overtones, as well as feelings of closeness and linked fate, among diverse workers. On one evening, for example, conversation turned to checks that had recently been delivered, due to a tax cut. A reservation agent, a cook, some of the food preparatory workers, and two room-service agents were all discussing how disappointed they were that they either had not received the tax cut or had received much less than they felt was promised. Denny D., a line cook, remarked that "government isn't out for us working people," which met with other workers' firm agreement. Sarah even declared, "They ain't looking out for us. We should take the whole thing over." Workers invoked a language of "us" and "we" persistently, despite the racial, ethnic, gender, and other group categorizations that differed among them.

It is true that most of the workers at MJE's who made these remarks and took these actions were not linking arms and marching off the job in response to their shared grievances. The vast majority did not formally mobilize fellow employees over the collective inequities they faced. African American, female, white, Latino/a, and other identities were referenced much more frequently than ones associated with social class. But to say that these workers lacked solidarity with one another, and that identity politics were to blame, does not ring true. Expressions of worker solidarity occurred, often across demographic lines. Those who voiced these sentiments and engaged in these activities were usually the same workers who were the most politically attuned to how their own racial, ethnic, and/or gender group memberships influenced their lives and the lives of others in that particular group.

This conundrum is the focus of this book. On the one hand, the predominant view is that there is comparatively little worker solidarity in the United States and that attachments to particularistic identities, such as race, ethnicity, and gender, are a major reason why (Gerteis and Savage 1998; Pacek and Radcliff 1995; Form 1985, 1995; Mink 1986). This view holds that the working poor unite infrequently, and demographic diversity, especially when accompanied by identity politics, shoulders a large share of the blame. The historical record certainly lends credence to this take. With notable exceptions, the labor movement in the United States has been relatively weak, and work-related identities have rarely formed the working poor's central political solidarity (Noble 1997; Piven and Cloward 1997: 17–39; Jackman and Jackman 1983; Borg and Castles 1981). Indeed, racial, ethnic, and

gender cleavages have been the focal point for debates regarding policy and citizenship (Hecló 1995). These cleavages undermine labor organizing when elites seek to divide workers along demographic lines and when particular groups of laborers refuse to align because of racial, ethnic, and/or gender differences among them (Goldfield 1997; Street 1996; Hill 1988).

On the other hand, observations at MJE's, ethnographic studies of low-wage work environments, and mounting empirical work on social class challenge the idea that the working poor feel little to no solidarity with one another (Fine 2006; Gordon 2005; Adler and Adler 2004; Lopez 2004; Newman 1999; Paules 1996). Several recent studies even contest the notion of a quiescent American labor force with low class consciousness (Fantasia and Voss 2004; Cramer-Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker 2004; Lipset and Marks 2000; Kimeldorf and Stephan Norris 1992). Against the backdrop of demographic diversity and attention to nonworker identities, social class matters and solidaristic actions take place among workers (Clawson 2003; Zweig 2000; Fantasia 1988).

This book brings these findings into a conversation with the prevailing view of the working poor. It connects the empirical reality that "worker solidarity" usually takes a backseat to solidarities defined by race, ethnicity, and/or gender with the world of identity and solidarity that workers describe. To bridge these views, this book examines three interrelated issues. This integrated approach unearths the solidarities that link the working poor, while shedding light on the psychological processes involved when workers do, and do not, develop feelings of solidarity with one another and the role of associational identity politics throughout. Implications for public policy and activism then emerge as central concerns.

The first issue is uncovering how the working poor define and make sense of solidarities that could link them politically. Instead of predetermining how solidarity *should* look among the working poor, this examination lets the *workers themselves define* the concept. The working poor explain and share how, if at all, they think about various worker solidarities. This approach focuses on the workers' thoughts and feelings in their everyday environments and reveals a variety of politically relevant solidarities among the working poor.

With this comprehension of how workers understand solidarity in place, the analysis turns to how these solidarities do, and do not, take root. This second main issue is important because of the impact that feelings of solidarity have on the working poor's ability to organize and alter public policy. Effecting change requires the development of political allegiances and ties capable of changing their material conditions and producing empowering policy designs (Ingram and Schneider 2005: 2, 10–11; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; McCarthy, McAdam, and Zald 1995: 5; Snow et al. 1986; Gamson and Lasch 1983). For the working poor, these allegiances must traverse their demo-

graphic differences. This analysis thus explains how workers cultivate, or cut off, precisely these sorts of allegiances. This is accomplished by detailing the psychological processes workers use to develop, or reject, worker solidarities.

Most assume that identity politics matter in these psychological processes, but it remains to be seen how. Investigating this “how” is the third main issue addressed. Thinking back to the training room table, the current assumption is that if George focuses political attention on his black identity, he will find it difficult to develop solidarity with fellow workers. He will be consumed with the plight of African Americans and may feel competitive with white workers, Latino workers, and other workers not of his race. His identity politics are thought to compound the negative effect that demographic diversity often has on worker solidarities. Identity politics are not synonymous with demographic diversity, however. If George works in a diverse workplace, he simply has a certain number of colleagues who differ from him in some way. If George practices associational identity politics, we know that, at a minimum, he feels close to other African Americans, expresses linked fate with them, and sees African Americans as comparatively disadvantaged. He feels political fellowship with other African Americans and views them positively. If he becomes more entrenched in associational identity politics, he also has causal explanations for why African Americans are aggrieved and is committed to political action to help them. In the language of social scientists, George has either *group identification* or *group consciousness* based on his African American identity.⁵ In more familiar language, George feels some serious solidarity with African Americans (see appendix A for definitional listing of key terms used throughout).

Why should his feelings of solidarity stop with African Americans? After all, developing the highly politicized, solidaristic framework that George has is no easy task. Might his positively felt associations with African Americans help him develop still other solidarities? Perhaps he will use these solidaristic views he acquired via associational identity politics to connect with fellow workers. The pages that follow consider this possibility by examining the psychological processes surrounding worker solidarities, concentrating on the potential role of identity politics.

It is vital then to understand what, exactly, identity politics are. In colloquial use, the phrase *identity politics* is often a catchall for most any reference to demography. The example to George, however, foreshadows the more defined usage that centers this analysis. Consistent with much of the literature, identity politics refer here to the *highly politicized in-group associations and fellowship characteristic of group identification and group consciousness* (Conover 1988; Conover and Sapiro 1993). These feelings are commonly linked to civil rights organizing, women’s movements, gay and lesbian organizing, and other social movement activism involving *consciousness raising* (Meyer 2005: 14–15; Saldvinda-Hull 2000; Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield 1994; Costain

1992; Evans 1980). The effect of such *politicized in-group associations/connections* for worker solidarity is at issue here. In order to remind of this point throughout the book, “associational identity politics” are often referenced rather than just “identity politics.” Unless otherwise noted, the two phrases are actually interchangeable as both signal the connections and views endemic to group identification and group consciousness. Adding “associational” simply reminds of this fact. How does associating with those who share a particular nonworker identity, embracing this association, binding one’s fate with those group members, caring about how they do, and making this connection the center of one’s politics impact worker solidarities?

This book thus examines: (1) how workers think about the solidarities that may link them for future political action and policy change; (2) the psychological processes workers use to develop, or reject, these solidaristic feelings; and (3) what role, if any, associational identity politics play when workers do, and do not, develop solidarity with one another. The insights that emerge are rooted in the recognition that the working poor rarely make this identity most defining for politics (Shipler 2004) and that connections with others who share their racial, ethnic, gender, and/or other nonworker identities are usually more prominent (Turner et al. 2001). This analysis takes these patterns as the starting point, rather than the finish line, for analysis, though. It examines what is next, what lies beneath these well-established patterns. For answers, it looks to workers’ ideas about solidarity.

Doing so ultimately supports some existing understandings about worker solidarity, refines others, and adds to the lexicon of what “counts” as worker solidarity in the United States. Having workers describe how they develop or reject these solidarities clarifies how, if at all, they understand and negotiate the factors alleged to undermine solidarity. A nuanced way of talking about diversity, identity, and solidarity also emerges. The notion that worker solidarity requires downplaying race, ethnicity, gender, and other group cleavages is challenged. This book concludes that this need not be the case *if* associational identity politics accompany the attention to racial, ethnic, gender, and/or other group memberships.

The volume’s interrelated approach to solidarity, activism, and policy design also pays dividends. It allows for consideration of whether and how the feelings of solidarity workers feel may be put in the service of activism—and the changes in policy design apt to result. The “social construction of target populations” approach provides theoretical support for specifying how exactly mobilizing around the solidarities workers describe can produce policy designs that empower the working poor (Schneider and Ingram 1993, 1997; Ingram and Schneider 2005; Meyer 2005; Soss 1999, 2000). Findings indicate that resources for activism and policy change exist in workers’ everyday solidarities and reasoning processes. Letting them define the conversation makes this apparent. In these conversations, associational identity poli-

tics emerge as a resource for challenging existing policy designs that artificially divide the working poor. In this manner, the challenges for activism and policy change from below become a bit less severe.

What then surfaces is an understanding of what worker solidarity means to the working poor and how this matters for activism and public policy. When their conceptions of solidarity are center stage, the working poor in this sample emerge as more solidaristic than the classic view suggests. This is telling, as informants first demonstrated all known patterns of solidarity and identity. But when analysis moved past reconfirming these patterns, workers' notions of solidarity emerged. These notions are not arbitrary; the feelings workers described influence politics. Most importantly, associational identity politics around nonworker identities helped many who are working and poor make connections with the fellow workers. The empirical reality remains that worker identities were rarely "number one" for politics, but many workers nonetheless connected with one another in politically relevant ways. One can debate whether their connections are "most ideal" for coordinated political action among the working poor. But this misses the point. The solidarities uncovered reflect workers' realities and therefore provide resources for building even stronger solidarities—solidarities that can help produce activism (Clark 2000) and lasting policy change (Ingram, Schneider, and deLeon 2006).

THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

The question of how the working poor define worker solidarity is not particularly controversial; however, it is rarely examined. A more common approach has been to develop quantitative indicators of worker solidarity and then query laborers to see if they have "it" (Schlozman and Verba 1979).⁶ This approach bleeds into analyses of class identification and consciousness in the United States (Gerteis and Savage 1998; Jackman 1979; Vanneman and Pampel 1977; Eulau 1956). Individuals who are working and poor emerge as being aware of their class position (Zweig 2000), but are unlikely to make this the identity that most influences their political thought and behavior (Devine 1992; Jackman and Jackman 1983). There is no reason to expect that the workers in this book are any different and, indeed, they are not.

As noted before, though, this conclusion says nothing about what the working poor make of their working poor identity, what solidarities, if any, they feel with those who are also working and poor, and how these solidarities are best characterized. To answer these questions, we need to know how workers organize their own cultural systems. Researchers who have done this when addressing different questions about economically aggrieved groups offer some possible answers for how workers might think about, develop, and reject worker solidarities.

Following her foray into the low-wage service economy, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich's (2001) best guess is that most workers do not have a highly politicized sense of solidarity with one another. That said, some workers did voice this kind of solidarity and many workers showed signs of recognizing collective grievances. These conclusions are speculative at best, as solidarity was not the focus of Ehrenreich's study. Her impressions do nonetheless suggest there will be considerable variation among workers in how they think about solidarity.

Other empirical work points to factors that should matter for whether worker solidarity develops. Mitchell Duneier's (1992) fieldwork with working-class African American men, Katherine Newman's (1999) interviews and fieldwork with younger low-wage service workers, and Eliot's Liebow's (1993) fieldwork with homeless women reveal that those with low-paying jobs take considerable pride in their adherence to the work ethic. Having a job provides a positive way to define oneself. The American Dream ideology remained intact for many in these studies, even though it did not accurately reflect the challenges of the workers' own job(s) and life course. Workers interviewed in this book should be no different. Pride and American Dream ideology are then likely important to any worker solidarities that take hold and should influence the developmental processes surrounding them. How they will do so is less clear. On the one hand, adherence to the work ethic provides a positive way to define self and one's fellow workers. This could make the shortcomings of work more salient and facilitate solidarity. On the other hand, pride may block worker solidarities if individual workers perceive that their adherence to the work ethic is unique.

Pride, the work ethic, and American Dream ideology are unlikely to be the only factors relevant for developing and thinking about worker solidarities. Patricia and Peter Adler's (2004) examination of resort workers notes the transient nature of many jobs frequented by the working poor and how particular demographic groups are concentrated in certain occupational niches. Greta Foff Paules (1991) highlights how workers maintain a positive self-image in the face of managers, customers, and the negative public image of low-wage service workers in her examination of New Jersey waitresses. All these factors will likely also affect what worker solidarity means to the working poor and how they develop or reject it.

When it comes to how workers might define the solidarities that could bring them into coordinated political action, then, the existing literature suggests that most will not make their worker identity of primary political importance or feel that their most pressing political concerns stem from it. Allegiances with others who are working poor are unlikely to form most workers' central political solidarity. The kinds of occupational and class-based connections found in many other countries are unlikely to exist among America's working poor. This says little about what kinds of solidarities exist or

how they are structured, though. Predictions that worker solidarities are unlikely to be “number one” for politics leave quite a bit of leeway for the variety and combinations of solidarities that workers may express. Depending on the shape of these solidarities, they might affect political outcomes and provide building blocks for even stronger worker solidarities. Pride in having a job, the work ethic, the American Dream ideology, the public image of service workers, and structural norms of low-wage jobs should all influence the developmental processes related to worker solidarities.

More formal hypotheses emerge about the relationship between associational identity politics and worker solidarity. The general debate about identity politics hinges on how it affects political unity (Hecló 1995; Ransdell 1995; White 1995; Steel 1990). Individuals on both sides of this debate agree that identity politics organize political thoughts and behaviors. They diverge on how this influence is felt for political solidarity. Worker solidarity is rarely their focus, but, by extension, critics of identity politics suggest that associational identity politics undermine more universal worker solidarities (Citrin 2001; Glazer 1999; Gitlin 1996). Critics directly concerned with worker solidarity suggest the same pattern: associational identity politics’ rise (endemic of women’s organizing, the civil rights movement, gay and lesbian organizing, etc.) bears at least some of the blame for low levels of worker solidarity (Piore 1995; Aronowitz 1994). Some advocates of identity politics disagree (Kyle and Jenks 2002; Rimmerman 2001). By extension, their views indicate that those with associational identity politics around nonworker identities will find that these views help them develop worker solidarities.

Political psychology offers theoretical grounding for both views. Social identity theory supports the critics’ take. This theory’s assumptions suggest that worker solidarities suffer when associational identity politics are already in place around nonworker identities. Group identification, and especially group consciousness, crowd out worker solidarities.⁷ Associational identity politics are a constant force in one’s politics that leave little room for additional solidarities. The politicized fellowship characteristic of associational identity politics crowds out worker solidarity. Cognitive development approaches suggest otherwise, holding that group identification and consciousness provide the cognitive skills to develop worker solidarities. The skills associated with group consciousness are more advanced and easier to apply, but individuals with either group identification or group consciousness around nonworker identities will find that these attachments help them subsequently connect with workers. Associational identity politics remain a constant force in one’s politics under this view but they provide skills for building additional solidarities and the desire to do so. Here’s why social identity theory and cognitive development approaches support such different views about the effect of associational identity politics for worker solidarity:

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY AND THE ANCHOR HYPOTHESIS

Social identity theory stresses the role of in-group loyalty and social comparison in an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, motivation, and cognition (Huddy 2001).⁸ It posits that individuals are motivated to maintain a positive self-image, define themselves in group terms, and assess themselves via comparisons to other social groups (Turner 1996; Hogg 1992; Wills 1986; Turner et al. 1987; Turner 1986; Tajfel and Turner 1979). When individuals make these comparisons, their assessments favor the groups to which they belong (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Rubin and Hewstone 1998; Brewer 1979).

According to social identity theory, then, individuals favor the groups they belong to, even if these memberships are relatively meaningless to them. Workers who feel group identification or group consciousness based on their racial, ethnic, gender, or some other nonworker identity hardly fit this description. A particular group membership means quite a bit to them, as it defines their own politics. At the very least, they feel politicized fellowship with those who share a particular nonworker identity and have linked fate with those in this group (Conover and Sapiro 1993; Gamson 1992). These associations should produce even stronger feelings of in-group favoritism than normally exist. Workers will favor those who share the identity around which they developed group consciousness. They will see this group identity as omnipresent in politics, not their "worker" one. This emphasis and favoritism toward a particular identity then crowds out attention to others—such as "worker." It can also create feelings of competition with workers who are not in their identity politics group. At most, adherents of associational identity politics will give passing attention to worker identities when they do not see their group identification or group consciousness identity as at all relevant in a particular situation. But, as adherents of associational identity politics, this is unlikely. They almost always will see their group identification or consciousness identity as highly relevant.⁹ Workers' tendency to categorize themselves as "working class" when forced to select their social class, but seeming unwillingness to make worker solidarities a defining political outlook, lend credence to this view.

An example is helpful. Imagine a Latina service worker with group consciousness centered on her Latina identity. Social identity theory predicts that she will have difficulty developing solidarity with fellow workers if they are not Latina/o. She may see her "worker" identity as relevant now and again, but she is unlikely to develop solidarity with those who are also working and poor because she is too focused on the plight of fellow Latinas and connected to these individuals.

The *anchor hypothesis* summarizes this more formally. It states that identity politics are an anchor weighing down worker solidarities. When identities defined by race, gender, and/or ethnicity become the focus of associa-

tional identity politics, there is little room for worker solidarities. One aspect of the worker's identity already is the primary focus, and this focus suppresses attention to other identities, while possibly creating feelings of competition with those who do not share the defining identity.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES AND THE BRIDGE HYPOTHESIS

Cognitive development approaches challenge the anchor hypothesis. For the Latina service worker in our example, cognitive development approaches indicate that once she acquired group consciousness with Latinas, she obtained the tools for worker solidarity. This interpretation stems from this framework's theoretical assumptions. Applications differ in their specifics, but all agree that individuals are driven to make sense of the world and progress through distinct reasoning stages when doing so (Piaget 1932, 1972; Kohlberg 1981, 1984; Gilligan 1982; see Cortese 2003: 17). Each stage involves increasingly more complex thought structures. Once in place, an individual applies these new thought patterns universally and cannot "shut them off." Individuals progress to different stages because their opportunities and experiences differ.¹⁰

When individuals develop associational identity politics then, they acquire more complex ways of thinking about social groups. With group identification, they feel close with fellow group members, perceive a linked fate with them, and feel disadvantaged compared to other societal groups. Those with group consciousness are additionally committed to political action to alleviate the situation those in their particular group face and have causal explanations for why their group has received a raw deal (Miller et al. 1981; Gamson 1992; Sigel 1996; Gurin 1985; Conover and Sapiro 1993). Developing either group identification or group consciousness thus entails taking on a highly politicized, solidaristic view of the world. Cognitive development approaches suggest these views are then applied across the board. The thought structures inherent in associational identity politics permeate outward and are utilized to make sense of the treatment others groups receive—ones individuals belong to, such as workers, and ones in which they are not members. The more critical and complex thought structures acquired through associational identity politics basically have an added bonus: they are transferable, meaning that they can be used to interpret the conditions and treatment other groups experience. Group identification and group consciousness provide the cognitive skills, or tools, for developing additional solidarities. The politicized fellowship and overtly political worldview inherent in associational identity politics is contagious.

For the working poor, this indicates that practicing associational identity politics based on a nonworker identity provides a *bridge* toward worker solidarities. This is the *bridge hypothesis*. It holds that group identification, and

especially group consciousness, facilitate worker solidarity by providing characteristic ways of thinking that are highly politicized, solidaristic, and group-centric. These thought processes get universally applied and provide a path, or bridge, to solidarities with additional groups. In this case, the group is workers.

Both social identity theory and cognitive development approaches then indicate that group identification and group consciousness are defining political predispositions that consistently influence the politics of those who develop them (Alvaerz and Brehm 2002; Sigel 1996; Conover 1988). The theoretical frameworks simply differ as to how this influence will be felt for worker solidarity. Social identity theory and the anchor hypothesis predict that associational identity politics will crowd out worker solidarities. Cognitive development approaches and the bridge hypothesis predict that associational identity politics will provide the skills needed to develop worker solidarities and the impetus to do so.

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW AND PLAN OF THE BOOK

Examining these hypotheses requires understanding how individual workers make sense of themselves, how they relate to fellow workers, and how these patterns develop. More removed research strategies would have been inappropriate to examine such issues. It was necessary to become immersed with the working poor and to engage in extensive conversations with individuals in this group. Consequently, the research on which this book is based relied on a two-pronged research strategy involving almost eleven months of fieldwork in a low-wage service job and forty-eight in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of demographically diverse service workers. As chapter 2 delineates more clearly, service workers toil in jobs that leave many working and poor (Shipler 2004; Shulman 2003). These service workers are thus a case of the working poor—a particularly appropriate one since most new jobs in the United States are in the low-wage service industry (Newman 1999; MacDonald and Sirianni 1996).

Fieldwork observations were used primarily to understand the nuances of the low-wage service environment, gain access to informants, and observe the politics of identity and solidarity in jobs frequented by the working poor. Though not the primary source of data, the fieldwork helped ensure validity. It increased the candor and rapport during interviews and expanded the data well beyond the interview sample by allowing for conversations and interactions with workers who were not formally interviewed in the purposive sample.

Triangulating fieldwork observations against interview data also provided a validity “check” that the sentiments conveyed in the interviews were witnessed in the work environment. Attitude-behavior congruence was the norm. Informants who described feeling solidarity, and those who

did not, typically acted on the job in ways that reflected these sentiments. The cases of Margarita and Molly are illustrative in this regard. Both work at MJE's. In our interview, Margarita spoke of feeling a highly politicized sense of solidarity with workers. At MJE's, when a fellow worker was fired, she asked management about proper documentation regarding the dismissal and spoke openly about the firing with workers despite management directives not to do so. Her feelings of solidarity were palpable in the everyday work environment. Molly, on the other hand, explained that she did not feel solidarity around her worker identity in our interview. This was evident at work. In a conversation with several MJE's workers regarding the firing, for example, Molly shared that the incident did not matter to her. This kind of congruence between interviews and on-the-job actions was the norm. Perfect congruence is unrealistic as it rarely occurs in human behavior but, nonetheless, fieldwork combined with in-depth interviews ensured that the views expressed in interviews typically corresponded with behavioral patterns at work. This consistency was evident in actions witnessed in the field after an interview as well as in comparisons to fieldwork observations conducted prior to individual interviews.

Interviews began after three months of fieldwork and were conducted in locales chosen by the informant. The only exception was that interviews on the job were actively discouraged. Only three interviews were conducted at a place of employment. In each of these instances, informants worked the overnight shift, which meant that no colleagues were around, management was absent, and there was virtually no chance either would arrive. Most interviews took place in the informants' homes and lasted an average of two hours. Informants differed systematically along the key explanatory variables of demographic diversity and adherence/nonadherence to associational identity politics (see appendix B for a complete demographic breakdown). Just over half of workers came from MJE's (25 of 48), and the remaining workers were drawn from other low-wage service locales in the area (23 of 48). The vast majority of informants worked in food or motel/hotel service positions.¹¹ None were currently employed as a part of welfare (TANF) requirements. Main topics covered during interviews were the identities that informants considered most important for politics, how they made sense of various worker solidarities, and how they developed or rejected these solidarities (see appendix C for interview schedule). The potential role of associational identity politics was considered throughout.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. This produced more than 1,500 pages of single-spaced interview text. Text was analyzed with the assistance of NUD*IST (QSR 5), a computer package for qualitative data analysis. Appendix D provides a much more detailed outline of the research design, the criteria used when making methodological decisions, the process of data collection and analysis, and how research decisions took internal and external validity into account. This appendix describes the purposive sampling procedure in

detail and how it allows for analytic generalization—or generalization through social identity theory and cognitive development approaches about the effect of associational identity politics for developing and rejecting worker solidarities. It also details how the research strategy allows for generalizing about the existence and contours of the worker solidarities uncovered and the reasoning processes surrounding them. The exact percentages of individuals using these reasoning processes might differ from the sample to the population, but the theoretically driven sampling procedure and pattern-matching analysis of chapter 2 make significant divergence highly unlikely. The data generated from this research strategy provided a sound basis for examining identity and solidarity building for policy change among the working poor that follows in the remainder of this book.

Chapter 2 compares the hardships and identification patterns typically found among the working poor with those mentioned by the sample of low-wage service workers in this study. The paradox of the working poor is that even though they experience considerable hardships, feelings of worker solidarity appear infrequent at most. This study's informants initially exhibited this pattern. Most described substantial economic and personal hardships. Being working and poor is very much their reality. They traced their difficulties, at least in part, to employment in the low-wage service industry and believed that other services workers experienced them as well. Despite these beliefs, informants usually mentioned identities associated with their race, ethnicity, or gender as being the most defining for politics. Their most salient solidarities were not with fellow workers. Indeed, where group identification or group consciousness were present these sentiments were almost always around identities unrelated to their "worker" status. The paradox was thus clearly exhibited amongst the sample of service workers. The culprit appears to be a familiar one: connections with individuals in workers' racial, ethnic, or gender group overrode connections with fellow workers.

With the initial consideration of identity in the fore, chapter 2 then introduces the manner in which the "working poor" are socially constructed in current policy designs and popular discourse. The social construction of target population approach helps makes salient how public policy reifies *firm* work status distinctions (working versus not working) that do not reflect the reality of service jobs. This evaluatively divides the working poor. Analysis subsequently considers: (1) how the solidarities workers feel negotiate the firm work status distinction (sections II and III); and, (2) what this means for securing empowering policy changes (section IV).

Having demonstrated that the classic identity patterns are in place among informants makes the analysis that follows in chapters 3 through 6 all the more telling. These chapters explore what else is happening when these patterns exist. Two forms of worker solidarity—coalitional and collective—are found underneath the well-known patterns. Not every worker felt these

solidarities, though more than half did. The feelings of group identification and group consciousness uncovered in chapter 2 often facilitated the development of these worker solidarities.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore a form of worker solidarity that almost half the informants described feeling. It is best labeled “coalitional worker solidarity.” Chapter 3 begins with workers explaining what this solidarity entails, how it challenges elements of the “working poor” social construction, and how it differs from many existing notions of worker solidarity. With it, shared “worker” identities were *not* emphasized, and other, nonwork solidarities were still more defining. Workers with coalitional solidarity explained that they felt solidarity with a group disproportionately confined to the low-wage service industry without believing themselves to be a member of this group. They felt solidarity with those in this out-group, but did not limit this to those out-group members who were low-wage workers. The out-group’s treatment and/or confinement in the low-wage service industry was evidence of larger, societal patterns of inequity against the group. Solidarity then extended beyond just service workers and thus did not reify firm work status distinctions. With the contours of coalitional solidarity made clear, chapter 3 turns to how individuals develop such solidarity and the role of identity politics in these processes. Three psychological paths to coalitional solidarity are revealed: feeling group affinity, believing that a group embodies one’s core values, and drawing a “similar struggle” metaphor between one’s own group and the group targeted for solidarity. Identity politics allow for the similar struggle metaphor. Most workers who described having group identification and/or group consciousness based on nonworker identities in chapter 2 used these sentiments to connect with their coalitional solidarity group. This is consistent with predictions derived from cognitive development approaches in the bridge hypothesis. Associational identity politics facilitated coalitional solidarity.

Chapter 4 examines the processes that led workers to reject coalitional solidarity. Associational identity politics were missing from all of these processes. The reasoning paths leading away from coalitional solidarity are actually incompatible with both group identification and group consciousness. This chapter drives home the point that the processes that generate coalitional worker solidarity are nuanced, but that associational identity politics are not at fault when it is missing. Diversity only undermines coalitional solidarity when preexisting feelings of associational identity politics are *not* in the mix.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to collective worker solidarity. This is the other form of solidarity workers described, and chapter 5 begins by comparing it with most existing notions of worker solidarity. Consistent with these notions, those with collective worker solidarity emphasized shared “worker” identities. They felt linked with other workers and valued these connections.

This did not mean, however, that they *valued* their own particular worker identity or that they necessarily favored union organizing. They explained how their “worker” identity had political relevance, but that it was not an identity they found most politically defining. The “worker” identity they recognized included spells of unemployment and/or welfare claiming. Solidarity was directed as such and this challenged the firm work status distinction.

This was the workers’ lived experience of collective worker solidarity, and it presents challenges and opportunities for organizing and policy change. It also leads to questions about what asolidaristic portraits of the working poor miss or obscure, as a sizeable minority (19 of 48 informants) felt linked with workers as workers. The remainder of chapter 5 examines how this collective solidarity develops and what role the identifications uncovered in chapter 2 play in these processes. The findings indicate that associational identity politics do not impede collective solidarity; rather, they are either facilitative or irrelevant. This again undermines the anchor hypothesis, while slightly refining the bridge hypothesis.

Chapter 6 investigates the processes operating when workers reject collective solidarity. The evidence suggests that several factors are to blame, none of which include associational identity politics. Rather, structural conditions in the workplace, low efficacy, the American Dream ideology, and demographic diversity pushed workers away from collective solidarity. This list is hardly surprising, but the analysis shows *how* and *why* each undermines collective worker solidarity *from the workers’ perspective*. Chapter 6 concludes by emphasizing the differential effects that associational identity politics and demographic diversity have on collective solidarity.

The final empirical section considers findings from the linked perspectives of activism and policy design. It views connecting the economically aggrieved for social, political, and policy change as a goal. Analysis places the examination of workers’ everyday solidarities in the context of political action and policy design. We see how the solidarities uncovered in chapters 3–6, and reasoning processes surrounding them, provide workers’ “normal time” solidaristic baselines. It is not a foregone conclusion, then, that these promising baselines translate to sustainable political action during less normative periods of overt activist campaigning. Section IV provides concrete strategies for ensuring these mutable starting points do, indeed, translate into sustained political action and empowering shifts in policy design. This analysis brings the findings into conversation with a historical record that shows how diversity has been used by elites to undermine worker activism and, hence, policy change. Public policies that reinforce evaluative categorizations which do not reflect the instability of service jobs further undermine change. It is less clear, however, what kind of defense preexisting feelings of group identification/consciousness around nonworker identities might be to these divisive efforts and policies. The evidence suggests that with associa-

tional identity politics, framing opportunities exist for those who want to mobilize the working poor, as well as those looking to divide them. Chapters 7 and 8 show how and why those looking to mobilize the working poor are more likely to be beneficiaries of the identity politics approach.

Chapter 7 takes up collective worker solidarity. It details why mobilizing around collective solidarity is apt to produce policy designs that empower the working poor over the long term. Analysis further demonstrates the congruence between collective solidarity and an existing organizing model, often coined “social movement unionism” (Lopez 2004; Turner and Hurd 2001). Examples drawn from worker centers and site-specific campaigns make this case, while pinpointing places where findings can further these organizing efforts and strategies. Associational identity politics is central here—especially for identifying and recruiting early solidaristic leaders among workers.

Chapter 8 turns to coalitional worker solidarity, demonstrating the types of movements that can best capitalize upon this solidarity, and the sorts of changes in policy design likely to follow from it. It quickly becomes apparent that these movements and policy changes are indirect from the perspective of social class. Analysis explores whether this is a tradeoff given the resources that coalitional worker solidarity and associational identity politics offer for activism aimed, at least in part, at policy change. Chapter 8 concludes with a comprehensive model of the relationships between identity politics and political activism among the working poor. This model makes clear the differences between how activism drawing on coalitional solidarity, and activism drawing on collective solidarity, can best use identity politics. Both facilitate activism, but in different ways. Together, chapters 7 and 8 present a nuanced picture of how findings can service activism among the working poor and what organizing around these sentiments likely means for policy design.

The final chapter summarizes the volume’s major findings and ramifications for politics and public policy. The more nuanced, and less passive, vision of the American working poor that emerges has political ramifications. This vision does not discount the one dominating the literature—it refines it. The working poor have other allegiances that, when asked, are primary. These allegiances, however, help many service workers draw connections between their fellow workers and the demographic groups that constitute the working poor. The vast majority of those who are working and poor are not marching in the streets hand-in-hand, but neither does the evidence suggest most looking straight ahead without any connection. Substantial differences exist among the working poor, and this analysis specifies the reasoning processes that produce these differences. Detailing these processes makes it possible to understand how workers laboring under the same conditions can emerge with different solidaristic views. Informants took multiple paths to and away from worker solidarities, but associational identity politics were

never a hindrance and instead were often helpful. These views made it easier to challenge policy messages that artificially divide the working poor.

All this supports strategies for mobilization across racial, ethnic, gender, and other lines that do *not* shy away from demographic differences (Fine 2006; Tait 2005). When accompanied by associational identity politics, these differences are resources for political action among the working poor that reflect workers' conceptions of themselves. The findings cast serious doubt, then, on charges that associational identity politics necessarily divide the working poor and citizens more generally. The pages that follow show how coupling associational identity politics with demographic differences can bring the working poor together.