

Introduction to Poverty Studies
February 6, 2008

Entitlement, Work, and Poverty

My parents are one of the few statistics that drives the American myth that work works. They came over to the United States in their twenties and thirties with nothing. Since coming over they have worked relentlessly to “make” it in America. And they did. They sacrificed and worked. Even today, they work seventy hour plus weeks. For them, work works. This attitude is in complete contradiction to Chapter Two of David Shipler’s book The Working Poor. Chapter Two’s title is “Work Doesn’t Work,” but according to my parents and their story, work *does* work. Thus, throughout class and while reading Chapter Two of The Working Poor, I noticed more and more that the environment I grew up in has influenced my views.

One of the questions presented in class for discussion on Thursday was “What advice would you give Christie, Debra, or Caroline?” My group discussed this question and the main thing I noticed was the hesitancy to tell Christie, Debra, and Caroline to take responsibilities for their actions. The group specifically discussed Christie’s situation and pointed out several things which she could do better, but more than once the excuse was made that even though Christie could not afford some of her decisions, why, just because she was poor, should she be denied them?

There are many factors and reasons for why people are in poverty, but I think a big one also has to do with the fact that the American culture breeds entitlement; America as a whole, feels entitled to things. A few quotes in Chapter Two that deals with this culture of entitlement struck me. For instance, cable is discussed as a commodity.

“Cable is no longer considered a luxury by low-income families that pinch and sacrifice to have it. So much of modern American culture now comes through television that the poor would be further marginalized without the broad access that cable provides. Besides, it’s relatively cheap entertainment” (Shipler 42).

Growing up, we did not have cable. In fact, my family *still* does not have cable, even though it is something we can now afford. On one hand I understand that poverty is not simply economic poverty – it is also the feeling of being disconnected and excluded from society. However, I do not understand how if one does not have money to buy food or pay bills on time one should have cable. So much of what is on TV – the fact that Heath Ledger died – does not affect one’s regular everyday life.

I agree with Shipler’s point that work by itself does not work. He makes the comment at the end of Christie’s narrative that “At her level in the economy, everything would have to be perfectly aligned to open to door to comfort...By itself, hard work alone would not pay off” (Shipler 46). However, I also feel that hard work coupled with smart spending plays a large role in getting out of poverty. I understand that several factors affect why there is poverty in this world. I also believe that it is not just the fault of the poor. However, I also believe that people in poverty should take responsibility for their actions. If someone can’t put food on the table, and is constantly trying to make ends meet, he or she is *not* entitled to entertainment or luxuries. The rest of the world is not entitled to these either, they simply have the money to buy them.

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few quotes struck me in Chapter Two. During Christie's narrative Shipler states that, "Try as she might to shop carefully, she always fell behind on her bills and was peppered with late fees" (Shipler 40). However, a few pages later Shipler presents two statements that contradict this one. "One reason for Christie's tight budget was the abundance of high-priced, well-advertised snacks, junk food, and prepared meals that provide an easy fallback diet for a busy working mother – or for anyone who has never learned to cook from scratch" (Shipler 43).

"Her spending had been undisciplined, she knew, though she thought she had improved" (73).

"Five and a half years of mortgage and interest payments had yielded nothing, and one of her dreams was gone" (75).

"Money may not always cure, but it can often insulate one problem from another. Parents of means could have addressed Amber's difficulties without uprooting themselves and discarding their assets. They could have purchased services; brought their own skills to bear; and walled off their house, their jobs, and their lifestyle from the intrusion of hardship. In the house of the poor, however, the walls are thin and fragile, and troubles seep into one another" (76).

"Try as she might to shop carefully, she always fell behind on her bills and was peppered with late fees" (40).

"Poor families typically find that food stamps cover only one-half to three-quarters of their grocery costs" (40).

"Recreation for Christie and Kevin centered on food and drink. When her eleven-year-old daughter brought home a good report card, they rewarded her by scraping together a little cash for an evening at a modest restaurant..." (43).

"As an occasional present to themselves, Christie and Kevin invited friends over, lit a charcoal fire in the metal barrel that had been made into a grill behind her ground-floor apartment, and feasted on barbecued chicken and ribs and lots of cans of Miller's" (43).

