Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath present a timely window on the contradictory inner dynamics of race, class, gender, and poverty in America. The exposure of extreme poverty, closely associated with an urban Black underclass, stranded by natural disaster and political neglect, was both a reminder of the existence of deprivation that the public is reluctant to acknowledge and a reinforcement of popular prejudices and stereotypes about poverty that the same public is all too ready to espouse. In the United States, poverty is commonly given a Black and disreputable face and then alternately ignored and demonized, part of a legacy of institutionalized racism that obscures the complexity of its demographics, causes, and consequences. Media coverage of the disaster followed a familiar script: surprise and discovery, followed by efforts to classify victims and victimizers, deserving and undeserving, laced with a little sympathy for the former and moral outrage at the latter. Regardless of whether Katrina actually generates new concern, policy, or programs for the poor or just represents one of the periodic rediscoveries of poverty, the portrayal of its ravages graphically reinforces popular views of who is poor and why that underlies much of public opinion and policy.

Yet the reality of poverty is much more complex. Across the country, although African Americans are overrepresented among the poor, they are not the majority or the only high visibility group among the poor. Whites make up the majority of all persons below the poverty line, and depending on location, pockets of White, Black, Latino, Asian, or Native American poverty dominate local landscapes. Yet poverty remains firmly entrenched as a Black and White issue, both literally and metaphorically. In this chapter, we examine one group—poor White Appalachian women—as an entry point into deconstructing discourses of poverty and welfare policy in the United States, looking at the
intersections of race, class, gender, space, and culture. The purpose is twofold: to expand understanding of the multiplicities of poverty identities, locations, and control mechanisms; and to show how the existence of this complexity nevertheless reinforces the welfare racism that underlies poverty discourse. We use an intersectional framework built on feminist and critical race perspectives to accomplish these tasks.

Overview

Poverty discourse, both academic and popular, highlights race and implies “Blackness” as the primary racial identity when examining welfare policy. This body of research rarely considers identities that are attributed to other racial, ethnic, or cultural groups. In her early work on Black feminism, Collins (1990) argues that the stereotypical representation of the “welfare mother” is an ideological image used to control Black women. Similarly the stereotypical perception of the “hillbilly” and “White trash” creates an image in rural Appalachian communities that serves to control and exploit poor, White women receiving public assistance. While welfare racism clearly exists in racially heterogeneous communities, in rural Appalachia where the population is primarily White, other sources of disadvantage and difference exist. By examining the intersections of culture, class, and gender along with race, we argue that poor Appalachian women experience a form of “welfare culturalism” that has similarities to the welfare racism experienced by poor Black women. In addition, we argue that not only do the negative stereotypes fostered in Appalachia serve to control poor rural White women, but they sustain a broader system of welfare racism that impacts poor minority women.

In the rest of this chapter we deconstruct the discourses on poverty and welfare provision in conjunction with an intersectional framework to demonstrate the ways that class, race, space, and culture intersect with gender to create the politics of current welfare policy. We begin by examining beliefs about poverty and welfare and how these engage different social locations and identities. We then turn to a critical view of intersectionality theories to determine whether and to what extent they privilege some social locations over others and how this is relevant for analyzing poverty politics. This analysis is informed by our research on the impacts of welfare reform on poor individuals, families, and communities in rural Appalachia (Tickamyer, et al., 2006; Tickamyer, et al., 2000; Henderson, et al., 2002). Based on the juxtaposition of the experiences of poor women across race, place, and culture, we end by evaluating the implications for poverty discourse and welfare policy.
Poverty and Welfare Discourse

In the United States the official poverty measure is defined by failure to meet an income threshold based on a formula to determine a minimum subsistence level constructed from cost of living data, adjusted for family size and composition and adjusted annually for inflation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Poverty in this formulation is conceptualized as an objective condition, defined by a scientifically devised, politically neutral formula that can then document differential impacts on some individuals and groups compared to others. Gender and race are correlates of poverty.

At the same time, there are deeply embedded beliefs about poverty and the poor that belie this technocratic view and create a subtext that forms the foundation for political action. Specifically poverty has long been associated with social values and judgments of worth and worthiness that determine welfare policy. Both historically and currently poverty status has been accompanied by beliefs about moral worth that attribute responsibility for the condition. Thus the notions of “deserving” and “undeserving” poor can be found in poverty discourse dating as far back as the English poor laws and by some accounts much longer (Katz, 1990). Attribution of deservingness has varied by time and place with changing views of morality and social justice, but the fundamental construction has retained its potency despite repeated efforts to debunk its claims.

The basic component of deserving status revolves around beliefs about responsibility for poverty status coupled with value for particular social identity. When poverty is seen as an accident of fate, through no fault of the individual to otherwise worthy and productive citizens, there is much greater likelihood of attribution of deservingness and a greater willingness to commit public resources to its alleviation. Alternatively when the individual is viewed with suspicion of moral slackness, there is much less willingness to take a charitable view. Women have been particularly targeted by these changing notions of morality. Categories of “deserving” have focused on normative behavior and sexuality. The White war widow with young children and working- or middle-class origins represents the quintessential stereotype of deservingness that all other categories are measured against. It is no accident that U.S. welfare programs have historical roots in widow’s pensions (Gordon, 1990; Orloff, 1993).

Just as income and poverty are highly correlated with demographic characteristics such as gender and race, so are attributions of social worth. Popular views of who is deserving and who is not follow societal prejudices and stereotypes. The same dynamics that economically disadvantage women, race and ethnic minorities, the lower class, and so on are at play in creating the representations that denigrate these identities, branding them as undeserving in...
popular perception. It is a short step from creating categories and labels of moral worth to attaching them to particular configurations of gender, race, class, and culture with consequences for political action and public policy. Public opinion about deservingness is quickly transformed into welfare racism and culturalism.

Welfare Racism and Culturalism

In most instances, the images associated with poverty have become synonymous with those of African Americans, although other race and ethnic minorities may be similarly vulnerable. The media plays a role in racializing welfare policy, and the subsequent perceptions of broader society, by disproportionately presenting images of African Americans in missives on poverty (Avery & Peffley, 2003). However, the pejorative race/poverty connection can be linked to a history of influential racially biased policy analysis and subsequent welfare policy.

During the 1960s’ war on poverty, Moynihan (1965) systematically linked poverty in the inner cities to the deterioration of the Black family. Rather than address structural causes of poverty, he argued that economically disadvantaged Blacks were caught in a “tangle of pathology” and blamed inner-city poverty on a Black culture that embraced broken families, illegitimacy, and intergenerational dependency on welfare. Much of Moynihan’s work was rejected by social scientists; however, current welfare reform policy rests on his and subsequent analysts’ “culture of poverty” arguments that blame the poor for their own poverty (Murray, 1984). Proponents of welfare reform have argued that the “problem” with welfare lies not with broader structural constraints but with the inability of poor people to take personal responsibility for themselves and their families, resulting in denial of “traditional family values,” lack of a strong work ethic, inability to delay personal gratification, and, ultimately, the long term dependency on public assistance (Reese, 2005; Hays, 2003).

Blaming welfare recipients for their poverty was part of a discourse imbued with racism that represented recipients, particularly African Americans, as welfare cheats and perpetuated racial stereotypes that produced controlling images such as the “welfare queen.” As a result, the ghost of Moynihan’s “tangle of pathology” view of the Black family was covertly reintroduced into the debate on welfare reform. This discourse “relied on and reinforced racist views of people of color in general, and African Americans in particular” (Sparks, 2003, 178).

The role of racism in the development and implementation of welfare policy indicates that the social welfare system is not color-blind, but systematically discriminates against people of color (Schram, Soss, & Fording, 2003; Roberts, 2003; Piven, 2003; Dill, Baca Zinn, & Patton, 1998). Socially and politically we “whitewash poverty” by reporting that the majority of welfare recipients are
White. However, due to racialized media presentations, the persistence of explanations founded in a culture of poverty, and the strength of race-based stereotypes such as “welfare queen,” the face of welfare is Black (Dill, Baca Zinn, & Patton, 1998; Schram, 2003). More importantly, racism not only informs and molds public assistance policies, but it also results in outcomes that significantly impact the life chances of poor people of color.

By disregarding race-based prejudices and discrimination in broader society, people of color are placed at a disadvantage in terms of successfully leaving public assistance programs and obtaining self-sufficiency. Welfare reform policy does not take into account that racial discrimination impacts the likelihood that recipients of color will be able to secure employment that pays a living wage or obtain safe, affordable housing and childcare (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001). A growing body of research reports the existence of “racial disparities” in the implementation and outcomes of welfare reform policy, as well as the treatment of Black recipients in comparison to White recipients (Schram, 2005, 253). For example, it appears that as the percentage of people of color increases there is a higher likelihood of stricter welfare reform restrictions and enforcement (Soss, et al., 2001; Fellowes & Rowe, 2004). Furthermore White recipients are more likely than Black recipients to successfully leave welfare (Finegold & Staveteig, 2002), to stay off of assistance once they have left (Loprest, 1999), and to have better options and referrals for education/training (Gooden, 2003).

Current discussions of welfare racism often devolve into analyses of the Black experience. However, other racial/ethnic minorities have also experienced the impact of welfare racism via the implementation and outcomes of welfare reform legislation. This is particularly apparent among immigrant groups seeking new opportunities in the United States and those minorities that live in isolated geographic locations. Empirical evidence suggests that the welfare system has been grounded in a “history of exclusion” and that welfare reform legislation works to further the disenfranchisement of other people of color in the United States (Fujiwara, 1998, 2005; Weinberg, 1998, 2000).

Prior to the implementation of welfare reform, growing anti-immigration sentiment responded to arguments that immigrants were taking jobs away from U.S. citizens (Fujiwara, 2005) and immigrant women were taking advantage of an overly indulgent welfare system (Fujiwara, 2005; Lindsley, 2002; Roberts, 1997) by restricting the access of legal immigrants to need based public assistance such as Supplemental Security Income, food stamps, and services provided by Temporary Aid to Needy Families (Fix & Zimmerman, 1995). While there has been a partial restoration of need based assistance to noncitizen immigrants, this mandate placed them at the center of a racially charged political debate and cast them as members of the undeserving poor, further bolstering anti-immigrant bias and stereotypes (Fujiwara, 2005).
Similarly the racial politics underlying welfare reform had a significant negative impact on the life chances of other racial/ethnic minorities. The limited research on poor Hispanic recipients in the United States suggests that their welfare experiences may be similar to those of African American recipients (Dill, Baca Zinn, & Patton, 1998; McPhee & Bronstein, 2003; Lee & Abrams, 2001; Weinberg, 1998). Furthermore the image of the “welfare queen” that has haunted African American women is also a prominent controlling image for poor Hispanic women (Briggs, 2002). Hispanics also face difficulties that are distinct to their racial/ethnic background when attempting to meet the mandates of welfare reform. For example, language barriers and conflicting cultural demands play an important role in the distribution of assistance, opportunities for further education, and successful entry into the labor market (Allegro, 2005; Bok, 2004; Briggs, 2002; Burnham, 2002; Cattan & Girard, 2004).

Other minorities residing in isolated communities have also been disproportionately impacted by welfare reform policy. This is particularly the case for reservation bound Native Americans. Given the extreme poverty on reservations, the high unemployment rates, and the lack of employment opportunities, tribal governments found themselves without the social capital or economic resources necessary to successfully implement welfare reform (Pandey, et al., 1999; Stromwall, et al., 1998). Yet, when recipients were unsuccessful in entering the labor force the stereotypical image of the “lazy, alcoholic Indian” was evoked as explanation for the inability to achieve personal responsibility.

In summary, welfare reform has consistently been tied to racial politics and has significantly impacted the life chances of racial/ethnic minorities across the country. Missing from this discussion is an analysis of how White poverty fits into the system of welfare racism. There is a need to examine White women’s experiences with the welfare system, especially in racially homogeneous rural areas such as Appalachia where clear spatial inequalities exist (Tickamyer, et al., 2006) and cultural stereotypes that create stigma and controlling images (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999). Appalachian scholarship suggests that the construction of an Appalachian identity and a rigid two-class system often parallels, and is as enduring, as race disadvantage (Duncan, 2000). Thus the construction of a rural Appalachian identity creates a dimension of difference that is denigrated by policy makers and represented as culturally inferior (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999), which in turn has a material reality for poor women in the region (Duncan, 2000; Billings & Blee, 2000; Lichter & Jensen, 2002; Tickamyer, et al., 2004).

We synthesize theory and research on welfare racism produced by “intersectional analysis” (Dill, 2002; Dill, Jones-Deweever, & Schram, 2004) with our empirical research on Appalachian poverty (Tickamyer, et al., 2006, 2000) to show that the facade of a universal social welfare system and policies disguises discourses that reinforce the real disadvantages that different race and ethnic
groups experience, including White Appalachian women. Appalachian women, as a cultural minority and a segment of the lower socioeconomic class, are twice exploited by the stereotypical images of welfare recipients. First, in isolated rural Appalachia the stereotypical images of White poverty—“hillbilly” and “White trash”—and belief in a culture of poverty serve to define poverty in the area and foster hostility from working- and middle-class Whites. These images influence economic development within the region with impacts on employment opportunities. At an individual level they stigmatize recipients, making it difficult for women to leave welfare and enter the workforce. Second, at the same time that poor Appalachian women are denigrated as yet another example of the deficiencies attributed to welfare dependency, their Whiteness becomes the means to argue that the welfare system is bias-free regarding race. Thus these stereotypical images serve to control the opportunities of both White Appalachian women and women of color as they attempt to negotiate the welfare system.

The existence of rural White poverty reinforces the claim that public policy is a universal that does not discriminate by gender, race, or any other salient category. The realities are that these dimensions of difference are reinforced by the pretense that poverty policy is unbiased and gender/race neutral. Poverty policy is neither culturally nor gender/race neutral, but the existence of pockets of poor White women in rural Appalachia provides a convenient way for policy makers to argue that neutrality exists with detrimental outcomes for all poor women.

Theoretical Framework: The Intersections of Feminist Perspectives

An intersectional perspective examines “the relationships and interactions between multiple axes of identity and multiple dimensions of social organization—at the same time” (Dill, 2002, 4). To understand the impact of structured inequality on individual lives requires scrutiny of overlapping categories (e.g., race, class, gender) and multiple sources of power and privilege (Dill, 2002; Dill, Baca Zinn, & Patton, 1998; Weber, 2001). This perspective has been particularly important when examining the intersecting systems of domination that impact the opportunities for women of color in the United States (Dill, 1988, 2002; Gilkes, 1994; Higginbotham, 1994; Weber, 2001).

Collins (2004, 351) provides a concise statement of the meaning of intersectionality as “analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization, which shape African American experiences and, in turn, are shaped by African Americans.” Oppression and exploitation can be best understood through an evaluation of how varying statuses within a hierarchical social
The system are intertwined to produce a matrix of domination whereby the experiences of individuals are bound by their specific social locations (Collins, 1990). Intersectionality captures the dynamic and relational nature of interconnected status and power hierarchies for defining group experience and opportunities.

One issue for intersectional analysis is how to evaluate contradictory social locations. In most formulations of intersectional frameworks, even recognizing the complexity of different combinations, there is at least implicit but more often, explicit assertion of a dominant identity, what in other contexts has been called a “master status.” Race in U.S. society, by virtue of its historical, political, and legal legacies of exploitation and repression, usually is accorded primacy. For example, in their analysis of multiracial feminism and the difficulties confronted by women of color, Baca Zinn and Dill (1996) argue that race is the primary structure of power and social segmentation and “even cultural and group differences among women are produced through interaction within a racially stratified social order” (203). Collins (1998, 211) similarly privileges race when she dispels the “myth of equivalent oppressions” arguing, for example, that the position and life experiences of Black women are not comparable to gay White men or similar nonequivalent combinations of advantage and hardship. In her early influential writings, hooks (1981, 1989) focuses on the unique hardships produced for African American women in the systematic acts of terrorism embedded in slavery and Jim Crow. Guinier and Torres (2002) assert the power of “political race” as both a defining and liberating condition. In these formulations, racial dynamics trump other group identities even as they forge unique perspectives in their intersections.

The focus on race extends from the binary of Black and White to include multiple racial categories and experience. Influential work by and about Latinas, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and immigrant and native-born women of various ethnicities and nationalities augments primary work on African American experience and extends empirical and theoretical understanding of difference and diversity for women of color in a variety of hues (Collins, 2004; Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003; Bettie, 2003; Hurtado, 1996; hooks, 1990; Mihesuah, 2003; Romero, 2002; Shah, 1997). Within this rainbow approach, the analytic category that remains problematic is Whiteness, because White denotes the privileged and majority end of racial categorization. When White women are part of an underclass, the contradiction between racial privilege and other subordinate positions presents the problem of contradictory social location.

Yet the existence of groups with contradictory positions is both real and important for understanding the “mutual construction” of intersecting systems of domination and subordination. In recent writings, hooks (2000) argues that “class matters” to both Whites and Blacks and Collins (2004) focuses on how the “new racism” embodying elements of class, culture, and
dominant notions of sexuality differentially but adversely affect both women and men. Each gives voice to more nuanced depictions of the shifting meanings of different combinations of social locations that may include nominally privileged positions. Poor White Appalachian women on welfare embody this type of contradictory location.

Consensus versus Crosscutting Intersections

A useful means of organizing forms of intersectionality is suggested by Collins (2004, 47) when she describes a model used by Cohen (1999) to examine the politics of intersectional identities. This model distinguishes between consensus and crosscutting political issues. Consensus issues affect all group members, although not necessarily in the same way. Crosscutting issues are perceived to affect one subgroup more than another. In Collins’s examples, race is a consensus issue for African Americans; gender and sexuality are crosscutting issues perceived by Blacks as only relevant for women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals respectively. If we turn this formulation around and ask how it applies to Whites, the facile answer is that Whiteness mirrors Black experience: it is also a consensus issue, although often an unexamined one given the invisibility and taken for granted nature of Whiteness for Whites; gender and sexuality are similarly largely segregated to women and LGBT individuals.

If this model is extended by analogy to consider class, the picture gets murkier, although, for both Whites and Blacks, class has a somewhat equivocal position. Within African American communities class has traditionally been subsumed to race, at least as far as political behavior goes, reinforcing the notion that race serves as the organizing status, despite the existence of significant class differences (Collins, 2004). Part of the dynamics of racial politics is that Whites too often perceive all Blacks as being lower-class, and much of the poverty and welfare racism endemic to U.S. politics is based on this stereotype (Schram, 2005). In other words, class is conflated with race for African Americans both within and outside African American communities, although for different reasons, making it a consensus issue. For Whites, however, class may be defined as crosscutting, viewed as applicable only to Blacks and to “underclass” Whites, a group pejoratively labeled in the vernacular with terms such as “White trash” and “hillbilly.” The result is to ignore poor Whites, rendering them as aberrant anomalies in the infrequent case when they are visible in the public eye.

The exception to this neglect is where the racial homogeneity of the population combined with historic and identifiable local cultural forms and practices creates a unique social location associated with poverty. Poor Appalachians, the “hillbillies” of popular culture, have assumed this role both
locally and in the larger society, and as such, form an interesting test group for understanding welfare politics. We argue that to extend the analytic power of intersectional analysis, it is important to examine the intertwined statuses of race, class, and culture with gender, whereby culture is the key structure of power and social division and “Whiteness” as informed by culture becomes the primary racial categorization.

**Whiteness as Race and Culture**

The study of “Whiteness” emerged in response to its absence in scholarly investigations of race and current concerns about the “end of Whiteness” as the result of accepted multiracial identities (Hill, 2004). Frankenberg (1993) was one of the first scholars to address the significance of Whiteness in understanding the broader construction of racial categories. She stated, “Whiteness signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage” (236). White privilege has certainly shaped much of our society and has systematically sustained an ideological and material system of power resulting in racial oppression (Jensen, 2003; McIntosh, 2002). However, it is also a perplexing and complicated social phenomenon that is confounded by distinct class and cultural differences. Hartigan (1999) argues that Whiteness is constructed just as other racial categorizations and White privilege is not normative or absolute, but is shaped by class dynamics as well as geographic and cultural labels. Newitz (1997, 148) notes that Whiteness as a racial construct is an “oppressive ideological construct that promotes and maintains social inequalities.” However, even as a dominant culture, Whiteness does not always result in privilege and power. Thus race may define Whiteness, but distinctions in class and culture determine boundaries of privilege. Frankenberg states that there are primarily two types of Whites “those who are truly or only White, and those who are White but also something more—or is it something less” (1993, 198). Thus there are Whites of privilege and Whites that are marginalized and defined as “other” (Allison, 1998; Newitz & Wray, 1997). This is particularly noteworthy in rural Appalachia where significant class divisions exist within predominantly White communities (Duncan, 2000), and a White identity often gives sway to a perceived Appalachian cultural identity that is rife with stereotypes and misconceptions.

In deconstructing Whiteness and White privilege, there is also a strong oppositional argument. According to Wiegman (1999), there is potential harm in giving minority status to what is a historical and contemporary majority. By advancing Whites the same minority status as people of color, a “mutuality-of-harm hypothesis” is constructed whereby Whites are said to experience racial oppression similar to that experienced by people of color (144). This is especially
problematic, according to Wiegman, when the category of White trash is brought into play. The origins of this stereotype can be traced to the “Eugenic Family Studies” project, which tried to prove through scientific investigation that poor Whites in rural areas were genetically defective (Rafter, 1988). In so doing, they fostered a stereotype that remains today of “rural poor Whites as incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid” (Wray & Newitz, 1997). By accepting that Whiteness is always equated with power and privilege, Wray and Newitz (1997) argue that the logical corollary is that poor White people are responsible for their poverty and oppression. However, Wiegman (1999) asserts that one must question the logic that equates class oppression with racial oppression (145).

We argue that the failure to evaluate the intersections of race and class results in a misunderstanding of the duality of Whiteness. The stereotypical representation of Whites, in conjunction with physical and spatial location, plays a prominent role in the marginalization of rural Appalachians. In the isolated communities of Appalachia, the conceptualization of White trash is often used synonymously with the term hillbilly, both of which play a significant role in the development and perpetuation of social statuses, identity politics, and a perceived Appalachian culture. While cultural studies and identity scholars are attempting to deconstruct Whiteness and address the rapidly changing face of racial/ethnic identity in the United States, we believe it is important to evaluate the intersections of race, class, culture, and gender in spatial locations where systems of dominance exist that result in White on White oppression.

Appalachian Culture and Controlling Images

The Appalachian region is one of the poorest geographic locations in the nation (Billings & Blee, 2000; The State of Poverty in Ohio, 2004), and lags other regions in economic development, employment rates, and per capita income (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2005). Rural Appalachia has a long history of high unemployment and persistent, severe poverty that is equal to, or worse than, that in urban areas (Rural Sociological Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty, 1993; Lichter & Jensen, 2002). While those receiving public assistance in both rural and urban areas may confront similar problems in terms of making ends meet and complying with the mandates of welfare reform, empirical evidence indicates that the constraints experienced by welfare recipients in rural areas are distinct from those in urban areas (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002).

Rural communities are often perceived by broader society as idyllic settings that offer a stable, wholesome environment in which to live and raise a family (Brown & Swanson, 2003; Logan, 1996; National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, 1992; Seebach, 1992). However, these views rarely acknowledge the
true nature or conditions of the region (Logan, 1996; Brown & Swanson, 2003). The extreme level of spatial inequality in rural Appalachia, particularly in isolated communities, has a significant impact on the ability of poor people to leave welfare and successfully enter the labor market (Tickamyer, et al., 2006; Zimmerman & Hirschi, 2003). Leaving welfare and achieving self-sufficiency through employment is hindered by the lack of job opportunities and the social/human capital required to facilitate the transition (Parisi, et al., 2003; Tickamyer, et al., 2006; Weber, Duncan, & Whitener, 2002). Unlike their urban counterparts, those in these isolated rural communities often confront an absolute lack of resources such as economic assets, childcare, transportation, healthcare, and housing (Henderson, et al., 2002; Rural Policy Research Institute, 1999; Zimmerman & Hirschi, 2003). Consequently, in comparison to those in urban areas, poor women living in rural communities often encounter more hardship (Brown & Lichter, 2004; Snyder & McLaughlin, 2004).

Spatial inequality in rural communities has a tremendous impact on the experiences of welfare recipients, particularly poor women. However, when examining causes and consequences of rural poverty, the structural constraints are often overlooked in favor of “culture of poverty” explanations. In rural Appalachia, poverty is not blamed on the lack of economic development and viable job opportunities, but on a culture where poor people lack the mainstream values of personal responsibility, a strong work ethic, and the ability to delay gratification (Lewis & Billings, 1997). In this region, a culture of poverty is often translated into an “Appalachian culture.” People in isolated rural communities are thought to be so out of sync with the norms and values of broader society that they create a “culture” based in psychological dysfunction and social disassociation (Lewis & Billings, 1997; Ball, 1968). As a result, they foster generational poverty by perpetuating norms and values that embrace laziness, a lack of ambition, pathological tendencies, and welfare dependency. Just as the majority of scholars have renounced the existence of a culture of poverty in urban locales, an “Appalachian culture” of poverty has also been invalidated in rural communities (Billings & Blee, 2000; Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999; Lewis & Billings, 1997). This explanation of poverty perseveres in rural Appalachia and in its wake we find misrepresentations of a population that is replete with stereotypical images of White trash and hillbilly (Denham, 2005; Harkins, 2004). The persistence of a culture of poverty explanation in rural Appalachia, and the accompanying cultural stereotypes, serve to parallel race in creating stigma and controlling images (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999; Duncan, 2000) that ultimately impact the livelihood and experiences of those living in this geographic region (Duncan, 2000; Billings & Blee, 2000; Lichter & Jensen, 2002; Tickamyer, et al., 2004).

With the passing of welfare reform legislation, our research group (The Rural Welfare Reform Project) embarked upon an investigation of the impacts
of welfare reform and devolution in four poor rural counties in Appalachian Ohio selected for their high levels of poverty and varying capacities to implement welfare reform.\textsuperscript{2} The study examines three primary populations most closely affected by welfare reform: public assistance recipients, agency directors, and local employers, as well as secondary populations such as case managers, outside service providers, and county commissioners that play a significant role in the restructuring and devolution of welfare. Using a combination of existing statistics, administrative records and primary data collection consisting of focus groups, surveys, and in-depth interviews the research was designed to provide us with extensive sources of quantitative and qualitative data from each of the participating groups. By analyzing interview data from agency directors, caseworkers, and potential employers, we were able to examine welfare politics in the racially homogeneous communities of rural Appalachia and determine the role of “Appalachian culture,” and the accompanying stereotypical images of White trash and hillbilly, in controlling poor White women on welfare in this locale.

By definition, welfare recipients are located in powerless positions within the welfare system as directors and case managers control the valued resources offered through public assistance programs. Similarly potential employers maintain positions of power relative to recipients in their ability to facilitate gainful employment that ultimately impacts the overall survival of recipients. Our data indicate that the perceptions of a viable Appalachian culture of poverty, and the stigmatizing images that are often associated with it, were invoked by all of the aforementioned groups when discussing Appalachian poverty and welfare recipients.

In our interviews with human service agency directors we found that most were long time residents of rural Appalachia and were very knowledgeable of structural constraints that hindered recipients from successfully negotiating welfare-to-work mandates. Yet these same directors were quick to fall back on stigmatizing stereotypes of recipients and the perceived Appalachian culture when evaluating persistent poverty in their region. For example, while explaining problems of recipients successfully leaving welfare and entering the labor market, the director from one of the poorer counties claimed that people in the area were lazy and lacked the necessary ambition to obtain jobs. However, later in the interview he clearly articulated his frustration with the limited employment opportunities in the area as well as a lack of agency resources to fund programs to assist recipients. It was at this point that he invoked the stereotypical hillbilly image regarding his lack of understanding of state regulations in the process of devolution, “What are my people to do? You tell me. I am just a dumb ole hillbilly, but I can’t figure this one out.”

Our data from caseworker focus groups also showed that while most were in support of welfare reform, they also had concerns similar to directors regarding
local capacities to successfully move recipients from welfare to work. However, they, too, resorted to stereotypical representations and Appalachian culture of poverty explanations when discussing poverty and the inability of welfare recipients to achieve self-sufficiency. As one caseworker stated:

I think the barriers that the workers face are just very significant. They either have legitimate barriers that the client needs to overcome in order to be employed or their attitude or you know, generational or cultural barriers that I think are equally as significant if not more so. Because how do you teach somebody whose parents and grandparents and sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles have lived through the welfare system that it not the way we want you. There is another way to do it.

Another caseworker offered a similar concern with the following comment: “Yeah, their mother was on assistance and they just don’t want to work. They don’t want to do anything.”

Even though caseworkers were cognizant of structural obstacles that recipients face in leaving welfare or making ends meet, they were also likely to make references to a dysfunctional Appalachian culture when discussing incentives to leave welfare. One caseworker voiced the opinions of others with the following remark about the financial incentive proposed by President Bush for those recipients who married. She remarked:

Oh my God, they’re [recipients] going to get married, get divorced, get married, get divorced. Because they do work the system . . . if we could give them, you know, $500 to be married . . . they’re going to get married, stay married for six months, get divorced and then get married again to get the incentive again. . . . these people have children with men that they don’t know their last name, men that live in Mexico that came up and had a party and they have Internet sex, like they meet someone over the Internet, go to meet them, hop into bed with them, have a kid and can never track the person down again.

Although potential employers are external to the formal functioning of human service agencies, they were instrumental in the survival of welfare recipients as they moved from welfare-to-work. One of the mandates of welfare reform was that recipients achieve self-sufficiency through work. However, successfully moving from cash assistance into the labor market in rural areas is difficult because of the lack the jobs as well as the social/human capital to facilitate this move (Parisi, et al., 2003; Tickamyer, et al., 2006; Weber, Duncan, & Whitener, 2002). Thus the perceptions of potential employers are vitally important in determining who procures the limited jobs available. In an analysis of interviews with potential employers, we found that they, too, incorporated stereotypes and culture of poverty references into their discussions of welfare
recipients (White, et al., 2003). One employer made a broad generalization that was consistent with the views of many other employers when he said:

This is a high welfare area . . . it’s been grandfather, father, and son right on down the line. It’s been handed down you know. Ah, people around here joke when the kids aren’t in school, what these kids are doing out of school. Well, they’re training for when they grow up to be on welfare. That’s typical in this area. You drive down the street in the daytime and mom and dad and the kids are all sitting on the front porch when they should be working around and in school . . . a lot of people see that as the culture and they see these people won’t work. They’ve never worked out . . . he’s not gonna do it cause he’s been bred up not to, brought up that way and it’s inbred into him.

Although this employer clearly believed in the stereotypical representations of poor people in the area, he strongly supported the existence of an Appalachian culture of poverty. Interestingly enough, in a follow-up statement during a discussion of available employment opportunities for recipients leaving welfare in his community, he said “in [our] county we probably won’t be able to come up with the jobs for people [welfare recipients].” It was clear from this statement that, regardless of their work ethic or motivation, successfully entering the labor market would be difficult for recipients.

Another employer expressed the disdain of local employers toward recipients moving from welfare to work with the following comment:

... most people equate welfare with laziness. And, a lot of people don’t want lazy people in their workplace . . . people’s opinion of anyone who’s had welfare, they just think they’re low lifes. I mean, I don’t know how else to say that . . . it’s just they’re not worth much.

Overall the strict class dichotomy in this racially homogeneous region results in powerful groups, in this case agency directors, caseworkers, and potential employers, controlling and stigmatizing poor White women through the use of stereotypical images and a perceived Appalachian culture of poverty (Duncan, 2000; Ball, 1968). By examining the intersections of culture, class, and gender along with race our results reinforce previous research (Duncan, 2000) suggesting that poor Appalachian women experience a form of “welfare culturalism” that is similar to the welfare racism experienced by poor Black women.

### Implications for Poverty Discourse and Policy

We have argued that it is important to consider the role that the existence of poor White women, and especially a clearly identifiable and visible group of poor Whites as is found in Appalachia, can play for defining the politics of...
poverty and welfare. At the risk of invoking outmoded forms of functional analysis, we can echo Gans (1971) by asking: What are the functions of poor Appalachian women for the society and the welfare system? Just as Gans demonstrates the social functions of the poor in undifferentiated form for affirming the moral order and maintaining status and power hierarchies, scrutiny of the uses made of different groups of poor people provides insight into the social and political systems that govern and benefit from their existence. In the case of poor Appalachian women, the answer lies in the contradictions of their positions within these systems. First, they are rendered invisible in the pervasive political discourse about poverty and welfare that blames individuals and particularly blames a demonized Black culture of poverty that appears to flaunt middle-class White values and practice for the existence of poverty and the abuse of welfare. Second, they become highly visible as the counterargument to assertions about the restricted and racist nature of the opportunity structure of U.S. society in general, and the welfare system in particular. Their existence reinforces claims for the colorblind nature of the system; whether they are stigmatized depends on context. Unlike African Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities who are invariably perceived as “undeserving,” they are assigned a shifting identify as “deserving poor” when welfare racism is in question, but locally they are the underclass with all the negative implications of this status.

Of course, these are discursive functions that describe how the existence of Appalachian poverty (primarily female, White, rural, and steeped in local culture) feeds into larger public opinion and debate about the reasons and appropriate policies for poverty in a way that ultimately is detrimental to all poor people. They do not address the actual experiences of the subjects of this niche in the poverty population, nor do they suggest how the knowledge that poverty has different faces and represents the intersection of different social locations and identities can contribute positively to policy formation. Recognizing that poverty is a phenomenon rooted in many communities with different historical relationships to the larger society is one step in wresting discussion from the hands of demagogues who use poverty as a code for race and racism as the basis of public policy. The issue is not whether the experiences and poverty of White Appalachians are equivalent to, or better or worse than other groups who are stigmatized and suffer deprivation and varying forms of oppression and subordination. Rather the purpose is to recognize the existence of this particular form of poverty, to understand points of similarity and difference, and to use this knowledge to further more informed discussion of policy goals.

What are the implications for poverty and welfare policy? First, is the obvious point that political action and sound policies and programs to benefit the poor are never an easy sell, but they are made virtually impossible when successful divide and conquer strategies are applied to both the poor themselves
and to how other citizens view them. Convincing the majority of voters that poverty is someone else’s problem, that it is particularly a problem of a racial “other,” and that it is primarily a problem created by individual and collective group failure, rather than the outcome of structural impediments and system failure has been a successful strategy for advancing the agenda of those whose goal has been to radically alter public service provision.

The war on welfare, otherwise known as welfare reform, has systematically dismantled the safety net originating in the New Deal and subsequently expanded during the War on Poverty and the civil rights movement. However minimal and inadequate these programs were, up until the last decade of the twentieth century, the trend was to expand coverage and access to previously excluded groups, including racial minorities and rural workers, both White and Black, who were previously excluded from coverage. At the same time, however, these changes opened the door to the form of victim blaming that defines Black poverty as welfare dependency and welfare use as fraud (Schram, Soss, & Fording, 2003). In the backlash, welfare has now been radically altered to eliminate entitlements that guaranteed access if economic criteria were met, a successful effort to reverse the hard won gains to expand the safety net of the previous century with disproportional impacts on African Americans but also on other lower class groups such as poor White Appalachians. The poor of all demographics are the targets of policies initially fueled by racial bias.

This is not to assert that all aspects of the efforts to restructure the welfare system are fundamentally wrong or that there are not successful and much needed changes, but we do claim that some of the underlying reasons for the particular forms they take are misguided and ill-conceived, based on misinformation, stereotypes, and racism. Additionally, in advancing arguments for the importance of scrutinizing class and culture, we are not arguing for the “declining significance of race” as Wilson (1980) and others have claimed, but rather for the necessity to recognize that “class matters” as hooks (2000) writes there are unifying interests within class categories that are important to recognize in order to transcend race and other structural barriers. While it may be utopian to expect that the poor can unite across race, gender, and cultural barriers, there is little reason to hope for change in the absence of such united purpose.

A second implication is that successful programs need to be context specific. Interventions of benefit to the urban poor may not strictly parallel those of rural residents. The hardships and experience of poverty may be similar, but the causes and remedies need to be evaluated for differences as well as similarities. Structural barriers to African American mobility are rooted in the history of slavery, de jure and de facto discrimination, and a long history of institutional racism that are now hidden in official “colorblind” policies that do not recognize these barriers. Similarly Appalachian poverty is rooted in historical forms of regional exploitation that have resulted in isolation and lack of economic
development. These examples could be multiplied many times over depending upon particular social location. For example, sources of Hispanic poverty vary depending on the particular ethnicity/nationality, regional location, and so on, so that poverty among urban Puerto Ricans will have very different sources than migrant Mexican labor. The point is that regardless of the specific history and circumstances, when the outcome is disadvantage and deprivation, the current barriers, remedies, and points of leverage for change may differ and have to be addressed accordingly. Thus urban African Americans may need more vigorous forms of antidiscrimination interventions to get access to jobs (Schram, 2005); rural Appalachians may need more direct job creation (Tickamyer, et al., 2006).

As primarily women with children, they both will need better childcare options and supports, but even here there can be substantial differences in delivery. In more densely populated urban areas, agency based childcare may be the most viable and desirable option, whereas in remote rural areas where there are few institutional supports, providing incentives for improving the quality of home providers may be a more feasible route.

A third implication is tied to the nature of intersectionality analysis. If this approach is to be more than a descriptive catalog of social locations, or worse a divisive call to ever more minutely subdivided categories for identity politics, it is important to find ways to move beyond the particular and to build on understanding of the structural conditions that this approach can bring. If we draw from the previous arguments the importance of clear understanding of points of similarity and difference, it may be possible to think about ways of transcending social location to begin to see the means of creating agency within categories and alliances across them. Intersectional analysis provides the means for revealing these barriers (and opportunities) and for giving voice to the varieties of experience they produce. It is the springboard for moving beyond their scripted outcomes.

The question remains of how practically this can happen? How can we overcome the scripts that gender, race, class, and culture create? Here we come full circle. Guinier and Torres (2002) argue that race is the “canary in the coal mine,” the first warning that the atmosphere is too poisonous to support life. What is fatal to the canary ultimately will harm all who breathe the poisoned air. They further argue that forms of resistance forged in racial struggle can play a leading role in seeking progressive social change, but this will require recognizing racial difference and harnessing the knowledge this produces. They see the possibility of transcending racial barriers not by pretending they do not exist, but by recognizing the costs, realizing that what is bad for the canary ultimately touches everyone, and using this knowledge as the means to organize for change.

The events of hurricane Katrina and their portrayal in the media are a recent manifestation of this canary, a revelation of the poisonous atmosphere
that still surrounds the lives of the poor and the particular role that race plays in its detection. They are also evidence of the distance this society has to go to achieve the necessary knowledge of poverty. Only by revealing the complexities of the causes, consequences, and experiences of poverty, including the lives of poor White Appalachian women, can steps be taken toward gaining this new level of awareness.

NOTES

1. We recognize the variation in identities that are often attributed to people of color from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. However, for the purpose of this chapter we will use the terms Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Indian/Native American interchangeably.

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References


