
Understanding Women's Work through the Confluence of Gender, Race, and Social Class

Cultural Dynamics

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Abstract

This article examines the experiences of women's work by focusing on the lives of working class and middle class women, African Americans, Caucasians and Latinas. Research for this project was conducted in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois, with adult women who live, go to school, or work there. We spoke with adult women working toward their General Education Degree and those with higher levels of education. Using intersectional analysis and a cultural constructivist framework, this study compares these women's different perceptions of the Humboldt Park neighborhood and their varying experiences as participants in the labor market and unpaid household labor.

Keywords

gender, intersectional analysis, race, social class, women's work

Introduction

This article examines women's work by analyzing the lives of working class and middle class African American, Caucasian and Latina women in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. Fifteen in-depth working life interviews were collected by our research team which included three students and the author. Most of our study participants were recruited from an adult GED program at a community-based organization, where the author conducted participant observation. We spoke with adult women who either live, go to school, or work in Humboldt Park, focusing on adult women working toward their General Education Degree (GED) and those with higher levels of education. Using intersectional analysis and a cultural constructivist framework, this case study of women's working lives compares and contrasts the different experiences of the Humboldt Park neighborhood (Brodkin-Sacks, 1989; Flores-González, 2001; Mullings, 1997).

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Rooted in feminist scholarship, the intersectional approach ultimately aims to disclose hierarchical power structures through the tripartite examination of the effects of gender, race and social class on women's working lives (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983; Crenshaw, 1995; Herrmann and Steward, 2000). Ultimately, an intersectional approach examines the complex structure and normative experiences—such as women's participation in the labor market and unpaid household labor—through the lens of gender, race and class. By situating women's working lives in such a framework, this study sought to expose unjust and unequal power structures and encourage social change. The multilateral character of the intersectional approach allows for a comprehensive examination of the underlying material and emotional conditions that structure women's working lives, including their fundamental—and fundamentally different—relationships to a shared neighborhood where they live and work.

The literature that employs intersectional analyses offers insights as to a range of structural inequalities in the lives of women, particularly in the fields of women's health and education. But this literature lacks the detailed empirical data needed to demonstrate what the intersectional analysis can reveal about women's work, particularly their ability to balance the demands of unpaid household labor with their often concurrent participation in the labor market, including informal economies. The art and science of the ethnographic narrative employed here—that is, in-depth interviews and observations of women's lived experiences—fills that gap by showing how disparities between women's working lives are reinforced and reproduced by differential access to education, social networks, and other forms of cultural capital, as well as through racism and class relations.

Theoretical Foundations and Literature

The intersectionalist approach analyzes the multiple social forces that create the inequalities faced by working women in one locality. In doing so, it overcomes the deficiencies of the so-called 'single identity' movements, which misleadingly isolate one form or another of oppression, and analyze it in isolation from all others (Kurtz, 2002; Stockdill, 2001; Ward, 2004).

To take a salient example, second wave feminism's examination of women's lives, in its challenge to social science inquiries in the 1960s and early 1970s, prioritized the struggles of Caucasian, middle class and at times working class women from relatively stable economies (see for critiques: Baca and Thornton, 1996; Crenshaw, 1995; Denis, 2008; Hurtado, 1996; Stasiulis, 1999). Second wave feminism therefore narrowly conceptualized oppression as solely a function of gender. By failing to see class and race as equally important contributing causes of oppression, second wave feminism critiqued one form of oppression while tacitly supporting others (hooks, 1981; Robnett, 1996).

An intersectional approach, by contrast, theorizes women's oppression as a function not just of gender, but also race, class, and, above all, the multivalent interplay of these forces. The intersectional approach, recognizing that no system of oppression is more primary than any other, situates women's lives at the center of a matrix of mutually reliant systems of oppression (Kurtz, 2002; Stockdill, 2001). It is premised on the notion that the impact of a particular source of subordination or oppression will depend, in part, on how that source interacts in combination with other potential sources of disadvantage

and inequality (Denis, 2008; Baca and Thorton, 1996). Thus, the mark of the intersectional approach is its concern with disclosing the multiple and overlapping forms of subordination and oppression—mediated by gender, race, ethnicity and social class (Beale, 1995; Bradley and Healy, 2008; Davis, 1983; King, 1990; Lewis, 2009; Nakano, 1992; Ruwanpura, 2008; Ward, 2004).

Given these multidimensional ontological and epistemological commitments, it is no surprise that the intersectional approach eschews a universalist mode of inquiry (Bhattacharya et al., 2002). A universalist feminist approach emphasizes the neutrality and applicability of a particular framework to understanding the lives of women, regardless of their differences. Universalists essentialize *tradition* and *heritage*, regarding these not as fluid categories, but as unchanging aspects of the self and community, across time and space.

Seyla Benhabib (1999) illustrates that view with her contention that those values that attach to all people form the basis for universal laws that apply to both genders (Canaday, 2003). Intersectionalists are skeptical of propositions such as this because they reject the rigid dualisms and binary oppositions (e.g. male/female, nature/culture and public/private) characteristic of Enlightenment thought (Barriteau, 2003; Nicholson, 1990).

Beginning from the widely shared premise that all analyses are partial, intersectionalists reject a universalist mode of inquiry and replace it with an approach that attends to the particulars of time, place, and culture (Combahee River Collective, 1983; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006). This thoroughgoing contextualism helps to disclose the processes by which women form a sense of self, connect with their local neighborhoods and wider cultural communities, and negotiate the deep-seated social barriers thrown up by their gender, race, and class standing. Moreover, by examining the structural and personal forces that mediate women's working lives, the intersectional approach lays bare the ideological content of women's social capital (resources based on social networks acquired through one's social class), cultural capital (resources based on knowledge acquired through education), and the structural—e.g. the social, economic and political—content of their lives (Bourdieu, 1984).¹

The intersectional approach I employ here examines the unequal distribution of social resources, such as education and access to social networks that help secure fulfilling employment, as a function of the overlapping and mutually reinforcing systems of subordination that affect the lived experiences of working women. It is well-established that distributive inequalities reproduce, and are reproduced by, women's disproportionate abilities to choose and pursue various career paths (Krieger and Zierler, 1996; Mullings and Wali, 2001; Tate, 1997). But the existing intersectionalist literature has paid scant attention to how such inequalities are mirrored in the lives of women who share overlapping commitments to a shared neighborhood. This article seeks to fill that gap by examining the uneven career prospects for women living and working in Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood, and their correspondingly different ideas about the meaning of work.

The Context

Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood provides an instructive site for the investigation of women's work and lived experiences, in part because of the dramatic, largely downward, transformation of that neighborhood's labor market over the past few decades. The

neighborhood once enjoyed a thriving labor market in the manufacturing industry. But overseas outsourcing beginning in the 1970s and continuing through the 1990s reduced those jobs by 70 percent (US Dept of Labor, 2007; Howard, 1998). In addition to the city-wide loss of industrial labor opportunities, Humboldt Park was transformed in the new millennium by redevelopment efforts, which brought increasingly larger waves of middle class populations to what had long been a predominantly working class neighborhood.

Humboldt Park is located on Chicago's northwest side, in an area that before the 1950s mostly housed immigrants from Eastern Europe. Nowadays, Humboldt Park is home to documented and undocumented immigrants, working class and middle class women, and women from myriad cultural backgrounds, including African Americans and Latinas. The composition of immigrants and minorities in Humboldt Park is representative of Illinois as a whole, which ranks tenth in the United States in the number of foreign-born residents (Illinois Dept of Employment Security, 2008). Although the neighborhood is still predominantly working class, it is also home to middle class Caucasian arrivals, many of whom are the beneficiaries of long-term, city-subsidized redevelopment efforts and, most recently, a deflated housing market.

Despite its multicultural composition, the neighborhood maintains a strong Puerto Rican identity. Its business district on Division between Western and California—also known as *Paseo Boricua* in Taino, or 'Puerto Rican passageway'—is marked with two 59-foot steel Puerto Rican flags. Other markers of Humboldt Park's nearly 60-year Puerto Rican presence and enduring loyalty to the homeland are the newly constructed low-income housing projects in the style of Old San Juan, Puerto Rican food at restaurants like Borinquen, and the abundance of murals depicting the struggles of Puerto Rican heroes.

A 207-acre park—the neighborhood's namesake—was added to the national register of historic places in the 1990s. Developers originally promoted the park as symbolizing a transition from gang-related violence to cultural heritage and recreation. By day, it is a bustling nexus of food vendors, cultural and recreational activities, joggers, dog play groups and families. At dusk, however, the park continues to provide an operations base for gangs such as the Young Lords, Latin Kings and Latin Disciples.

Humboldt Park's most passionate supporter in framing the neighborhood's cultural identity is the Puerto Rican Cultural Community Center (PRCC). The PRCC has employed different practices to resist the displacement of community residents through cultural nationalism and anti-colonialist activism. The PRCC has had a stake in rebuilding the business district and securing a Puerto Rican presence in the neighborhood. The PRCC's turbulent past began with community activism in the 1970s and 1980s, when Puerto Ricans displaced from the Lincoln Park neighborhood (located northeast of Humboldt Park) sought to reclaim their place in Chicago's urban landscape. The PRCC's endeavors continue to be rooted in acts of resistance, expressed through self-determination and anti-colonialism (Rinaldo, 2002).

Humboldt Park Women

Women who live or work in Humboldt Park comprise a richly diverse labor pool. Many are engaged in low-to-high risk informal economic activities that prevent them from achieving economic stability. Women on the low risk end of the informal economy scale engage in

activities such as food sales and preparation. At the high risk end are women involved in sex work, drug sales and other hazardous activities that threaten incarceration, increased health risks and worse (Hofman et al., 2003; Johnson, 2003). Humboldt Park women also work as community activists, leaders, educators and organizers (Rinaldo, 2002; Toro-Morn, 1995). They work as activists, organize and run NGOs, and serve on neighborhood advisory boards. All our interviewees have an intimate relationship to the Humboldt Park neighborhood. They work in a variety of industries, including homecare, food service, human resources and retail. They are janitors, bank clerks, orthodontist assistants, accountants and salespeople. Some work in neighborhood schools. Others aspire to own a business or become professionals such as nurses or social workers. In addition to their day jobs, a number of interviewees work in the informal sector, including daycare, housecleaning (usually for relatives), and food vending (usually in the neighborhood's park or in the back of small grocery or other corner stores). Others—mostly those women who recently relocated to Humboldt Park—have jobs outside of the neighborhood, some that require advanced education in fields such as accounting and financial advising.

The older generation of Humboldt Park's women laborers worked in neighborhood factories. These women worked as quality control inspectors, assemblers and packers. But those manufacturing jobs dried up in the 1990s when international trade agreements—NAFTA, principally—encouraged international outsourcing through lower import tariffs and other subsidies. Some were able to find similar manufacturing jobs outside the neighborhood. But these were less attractive, not least because of the expense of a longer commute. Others had to either relocate or settle for less gainful employment.

The majority of our interviewees were in the process of working toward their GED. Some of these had weak reading and writing skills. The oldest student was illiterate when she began her GED program. Others were court-ordered to enroll in a variety of programs that teach so-called life skills, including the GED program. Not surprisingly, all felt that earning a GED would fortify their job prospects, save them from the low-wage, dead end job cycle, and bolster their self-worth.

We met with the GED women at Association House of Chicago, an agency that has served economically disadvantaged populations living in Humboldt Park and elsewhere in Chicago for more than 100 years. Located in Humboldt Park, Association House offers programs in English and Spanish, including English as a Second Language (ESL). In addition to the GED program, it offers citizenship preparation classes and an alternative high school. Unlike the PRCC, Association House is not engaged in the multifaceted activism just described.

Our study participants were unmarried mothers, grandmothers and married women without children. Some were unemployed, but looking for a job. *All* participants work in order to sustain their households and most to care for their loved ones. This study sought to document a wide range of their experiences including their struggles, aspirations, and success stories.

Methodology

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained to protect the identities of our study participants. Interviewees were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point and participated in the study voluntarily. We informed the participants that the

information they provided would be confidential and that their identities would not be revealed. Accordingly, I use pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. In some instances, I created composite identities for further protection. These served the additional purpose of allowing me to highlight particular themes that ran through separate narratives.

Three research assistants contributed to this study: a graduate student who obtained access to study participants by volunteering for six months as a GED tutor in the GED program and helped conduct the interviews; an undergraduate who volunteered for about six weeks in the same program; and an undergraduate who helped transcribe the interviews. Two of my research assistants are Latina and one is Caucasian, like me. I hired them for their academic and language skills. Although the author did not tutor the study participants, she spent significant time at Association House interacting with staff and students.

We collected 15 in-depth working life interviews over a six-month period. The interviews often left us emotionally exhausted, having listened to so many difficult stories. But we were also inspired by the many stories of women's resourcefulness and determination to get an education and find rewarding work. Our interviewees were African American, Caucasian and Latina women (Puerto Rican and Mexican) between the ages of 28 and 71. Twelve participants were recruited from the GED program at Association House. Of these, three worked at Association House (one as a staff person and two as teachers). The other nine were GED program students. Additionally, three women who live in the community were included in the study. In terms of the interviewees' social and cultural capital, eleven were working class and four were middle class.

I designed the interview questions to highlight a variety of topics, including impediments to accessing the labor market and negotiating household responsibilities, information about living arrangements, and education. We asked questions pertaining to the participants' educational and employment histories, such as how participants found work, what challenges they faced, their aspirations for the future, and their definition of a dream job. We also explored women's views about household obligations, support systems, and potential impediments to success. To learn more about the participants' lived experiences, we asked about the reasons for living in, or relocating to, Humboldt Park.

The Cultural Meanings of Work and Education

Disproportionate resources, educational opportunities, class and race-based social networks negatively impact women of color and non-native women. Middle class women—women, that is, with stable economic resources and access to fulfilling and gainful employment—are often segregated from women with less social capital or fewer acquired social networks. We interviewed four middle class women—three Caucasians and one African American—in their homes and in a café to learn more about their struggles and accomplishments, including how they viewed their jobs and career prospects.

These women had all completed secondary, and in some cases higher, education. By contrast, many of the women in the GED program tended to have less fulfilling, and more physically or emotionally challenging, employment. They tended to occupy particular labor-market segments reserved for those with less education and fewer marketable skills. Some had suffered childhood abuse and teen pregnancies. And they frequently

had multiple connections to the penal system through friends, relatives, or first-hand experience. Juggling childcare, jobs, household work, and family, many had limited time for an interview, but were willing to use class time to be interviewed. As a result, we interviewed all the GED participants at Association House.

The interviewees expressed their ideas about work in a number of different ways. Many women attending the GED program understood work as a way of making money and sustaining one's household and loved ones. For them, unlike the middle class women we interviewed, jobs were not career choices or expressions of one's social status identity.

Consuela, a Mexican American single working mother of three in her 40s, understood work as an extension of being human. Not working, she said, would be like not living. For her, work was fundamentally connected to life, not separate from it. She did not think her high school diploma would land her more lucrative employment. Yet she felt she needed to obtain an education for herself and her kids. Irene, a middle class, African American teacher in the GED program in her sixties, said work is not *only* about earning money: 'It is just human nature to work. I like having a purpose and being involved. I can't remember a time when I wasn't working, except for vacations.' Both Consuela and Irene worked for most of their lives.

As the sole caretaker and provider for her kids, Consuela did *all* the housework while she was married. She mainly worked in factories. After hours, she sold food in the neighborhood. Her oldest daughter helped at the time. Now, Consuela does all the housework, including preparing the food she sells. Here is how she explained her household obligations:

I did the same thing my mom did; I did most of it [housework]. I would tell [my daughters] they had to clean their room, like my mom would, and they had to help each other. Until I approved and I agreed that the room was OK for them to play, then they wouldn't play otherwise because the toys wouldn't come out. I did everything every day.

Evalisse, a 47-year old Puerto Rican woman, made clear she never had the luxury of vacations, emphasizing that housework was her 'second job'. Evalisse worked during her vacation time because, as a single parent, she needed all the money she could earn. She wanted to know what it was like to have a vacation. Work, she said, is part of life.

Irene never married and never had children. Nor did she need the extra money as badly as Evalisse and Consuela. She explained why she would spend her retirement working: 'A much lower percentage of people retire today. Many can't afford to be retired because we lost so much of our retirement money. The other thing is that I'm too young to not be involved in some sort of work.'

Irene's comment about being 'too young not to work' expressed a powerful cultural value of the meaning of work in our society and of having control over her income and thus her life. Irene lived alone and did not do much housework. She said she rarely cooked for herself and had grown up with family members doing the housework. For her, flexibility, a good working atmosphere, and camaraderie were among the most important aspects of a job. Flexibility, in terms of working hours and location (being able to attend to young children), were especially important for single parents such as Consuela and Evalisse. Evalisse also valued a working environment free from sexual harassment—a subject on which two interviewees elaborated.

Describing her view on the most important aspects of a job, Latrice, an African American single mother with young children, said: 'First the location; I can't drive far; I can't drive on the highway, [only] just like in my local area I know I'm familiar with; umm . . . second, depending what kind of job it is; third the pay.' Latrice did not have a social support network for childcare. Having to relocate for a job proved particularly difficult for her. Job flexibility for Latrice meant being able to spend as much time as possible with her kids and having some say over her shift times. Ultimately, being able to negotiate the terms of her employment proved more important to Latrice than a pay raise.

Tanya, a college-educated Caucasian bank employee in her mid thirties, was also less interested in her earning potential than having job flexibility. Flexibility for her meant not having to be 'micromanaged' by her superiors and the ability to learn from her job. She wanted intellectual fulfillment and personal growth from her job:

It doesn't necessarily mean I have to move up, but I have to continue to grow and learn other things. If I had to just be stagnant and just stay still with the same responsibilities day in and day out, I would have left. If I can't have that challenge, I don't think I would stick around. I need to have the freedom to solve a problem and present a solution on my own without being micromanaged.

This sentiment was echoed by Rachael, a Puerto Rican woman in her forties with a checkered past. For Rachael, who was court-ordered to enroll in the GED program, work meant a good work environment and 'bettering yourself'. As Rachael explained, she found herself at a crossroads in the not too distant past:

Once you get caught in a store it's all over. In the mall, they all tell their colleagues and each other, you know, look out for this type of person. So, it was that type of thing. I was like the bad person in the mall. If you see her around don't let her around and watch her. Unfortunately, I had built up a background for myself. All were misdemeanor cases, until the last one. That's when I entered the program . . . that's where the ladies that have the bands on their legs are. The program can work to your advantage if you wanted it to . . . it goes with different levels and once you get to the second level they allow you to either go out and look for work or they give you the choice of going back to school.

Rachael chose school. She spoke about her dreams of going to college and becoming a social worker—helping other people, as she put it. Latrice, Rachael, and Tanya are seeking personal fulfillment in their working lives, albeit through different means and dissimilar educational histories.

None of our interviewees had post-college education. Two of the four middle class participants had a college degree, one participant was working on her BA and another had two undergraduate degrees. In contrast, most of the GED students stopped going to school when they were young, and they resumed their education later in life. The most common reasons for wanting to attain a GED diploma were to self-improve and obtain more fulfilling employment by achieving higher reading, writing and math competency. One participant explained that when working in a bakery (a job she loved) she had trouble spelling the words she had to put on birthday cakes. She quit her job because she was too embarrassed to admit she had trouble spelling. Another participant, who works in an

orthodontist's office, said she felt uncomfortable explaining the treatments to patients. Not being able to complete their education, both women lacked basic reading and writing skills. They felt that not completing their education had affected their whole lives. They mostly felt stuck in their predicament and wanted to change their lives. Two women expressed wanting to get their GED to help their children with homework. The general sentiment, however, was that they wanted to obtain an education to improve their lives and change their employment trajectory. Sandra said:

I got to a point where I said my life is just passing me by and I have these boys that look up to me as a role model, you know. What do I have to show them? So I decided to come back to school and then get my high school diploma and then do something with my life. And I did. It took a lot out of me, it took a lot of commitment.

During our interviews, we asked how women went about finding employment. Most women in the GED program found work through newspaper advertisements, more recently the internet, and temporary employment agencies. The older generation negotiated their employment differently, often by just showing up at a particular manufacturing plant they heard was hiring. Elizabeth, a Caucasian, middle class woman in her thirties, had a very different experience. She explained that in high school she worked for her aunt, who owned a business in Wisconsin. Elizabeth's aunt taught her accounting and bookkeeping. Elizabeth's childhood experience served her in Chicago, where she was able to secure post-college employment at Northwestern University using her bookkeeping skills. She landed the job through a friend, and had used such social capital and networking skills for prior jobs. Discussing her employment history, Elizabeth said she found employment mostly through social networks:

It was easy to have a family member that said, 'Hey you want to work for a couple hours after school and in your summer?' And then over my summer break during college I would go home and work with her. Thinking about all the ways I found jobs, there's a lot of nepotism. [*Laughter*]

Elizabeth described doing most of the housework. Her husband's responsibilities began and ended with taking out the trash. Because of their relative economic privilege, Elizabeth and Tanja were able to hire housecleaners to help with more difficult tasks, which mitigated some of the pressures of balancing home and work life.

Responses to Neighborhood Changes

Gentrification, redevelopment efforts, and labor outsourcing have forced women who relied on local factory jobs to look for work elsewhere. This has caused longer commutes, rising childcare costs, and a generally more rushed lifestyle. For the older generation—i.e. the women who held the once abundant manufacturing jobs—redevelopment has meant having to re-educate to obtain more marketable skills.

During our interviews, we asked women what they thought about the neighborhood and the park. Few of the GED women dared to walk in the park for fear of being robbed or assaulted. Consuela said she did not take her daughter to play in the park any more and

generally felt frightened walking in the neighborhood, even just to get something from the corner store:

I'm really scared. I live by North and Kedzie like three blocks from North Avenue and I walk with my daughter to North Avenue to the family dollar store, and I get scared, I do. Cause you never know who's going to have the guts to do something during the day. I mean, I'm scared of Humboldt Park. I would take my daughter right here at the lagoon in Humboldt Park and feed the ducks. But then someone said they found a body in Humboldt Park on Friday, in the lagoon. Where I took my daughter to feed the ducks!

From the GED students we interviewed, Evalisse was the only participant who viewed the neighborhood in a positive light. She said it reminded her of Puerto Rico. Although she does not go to the park much, she takes advantage of neighborhood restaurants and Puerto Rican cultural events. Here is how she described her relationship to Humboldt Park:

I like living around here because this is the area where I was raised in and this is like . . . our culture; the majority of the Puerto Rican population live around here. They have businesses, restaurants and everything around where I live is close by; it's convenient for me to go to the store. Everything is right there [within] walking distance. I don't like the area because of the gangs, sometimes they get rowdy; [but] they don't necessarily bother me, but let's say when they have the Puerto Rican parade or something, they get out of hand. That's the only thing.

Latrice, who had been forced out of the neighborhood, said the community felt safer and looked nicer since redevelopment: 'There used to be a lot more gang members hanging around. I was scared when I lived here. Now with Caucasian people moving in more property taxes are raising. . . . But there's still people walking around asking for money.'

Elizabeth's views of the neighborhood and park were quite different. She had a more romantic notion of the neighborhood. She thought the park was 'absolutely gorgeous', and the neighborhood culturally diverse, which she, Irene, and Tanja viewed as an asset. Elizabeth liked to take her dog to the park and jogged with her husband there on the weekends. Generally, the newly arrived middle class women viewed the park and the neighborhood as more affordable places to rent or buy, more culturally diverse and less yuppie, than other Chicago neighborhoods. We asked these recently relocated participants why they moved to Humboldt Park and what they thought about the neighborhood. We also asked if they were involved in any community events or took advantage of any of the neighborhood's resources. Among the most common reasons for moving to Humboldt Park were to enjoy the park, the cultural diversity, and the fact that the neighborhood did not have that 'cookie-cutter-feel where everyone looks exactly the same'.

Here is how Tanja put it: 'You run into a lot of different groups of people that you wouldn't run into in other neighborhoods in Chicago. We bought there primarily because it was reasonable for us to buy a place there. It's still a nice neighborhood.' Eli, a stay-at-home woman in her late twenties with a child on the way, offered a similar sentiment:

Besides logistic stuff like inexpensive rent I like the neighborhood more. It's different [than] living in Lincoln Park or Lakeview [more affluent neighborhoods in Chicago]. There is the whole yuppie

thing that I kinda wanted to escape from anywhere that I lived on the east side of city. And I didn't like experiencing that kind of . . . attitude. There is something that is more down to earth about Humboldt Park than what I have experienced in Roscoe Village and Lakeview and those places. You know it is not as safe as living in Lincoln Park. [But] I wouldn't go out walking by myself at midnight at Lincoln Park. So, I drive a lot more [since] living in there, just because there is no retail within walking distance as in other neighborhoods in Chicago.

We asked Elizabeth what she thought of the neighborhood. She said that she loved the neighborhood but not the trash: 'I've noticed a lot of trash. It's not a clean neighborhood; people don't have the same pride in the neighborhood as in Lakeview where you have a trashcan in every corner.' Elizabeth's view about trash in the neighborhood served in this instance as a pre-judgment about race and class differences between herself and working class residents of color in the neighborhood. We asked her to compare the neighborhoods and here is why she decided to move to Humboldt Park:

When I first moved to Chicago I lived in Lakeview. It was a predominantly gay area; a very clean area. I mean I felt very safe there. You know, as a female I felt safe walking around by myself. There was a ton of restaurants and shops and it was really close to the lake so it was really kept up really nice. There seemed to be three groups of people in Lakeview: young, college age kids, or right out of college, which is how I was when I lived there, and then there's a lot of older wealthy families because property is so expensive in that area. So, definitely a really nice area, but definitely not as diverse. The place that we rented was a dump; we paid an enormous amount in rent. That's definitely different than where we live now. Humboldt Park is more affordable but definitely not kept up as nice, and that's one thing I would like to see change is that people took more pride in their neighborhood and tried to keep it nice; like when I walk my dog it's hard to find a trash can.

Elizabeth and her husband take turns organizing cleaning groups in the community. Weather permitting, every couple of months they gather a group of people and pick up trash from the park and the sidewalk grassy areas. They are also involved with the Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail, an organization promoting the conversion of the Bloomingdale railroad, which runs through Humboldt Park, to an elevated park.

While the recently arrived women viewed Humboldt Park in a generally positive light—as a cultural resource and a place to 'invest in'—the women in the GED program had more mixed feelings about the neighborhood. Women who had worked or lived in Humboldt Park for a long time (before redevelopment) almost uniformly viewed it as a dangerous place, plagued with gang violence and an unsafe place to walk in by yourself. A couple of women who still lived there agreed. They witnessed 'gang bangers' trying to settle disputes at Association House. They felt these individuals had invaded their educational space.

Balancing Work, Obligations, and Aspirations

We have seen examples of the importance of career choices, education and social networks to women's working lives. Career choices emerge from social relations—e.g. the home environment and education—and the structural practices embedded in the labor

market and society at large. We asked our interviewees about some of the obstacles they faced in meeting their employment goals. Abusive and jealous partners were mentioned on several occasions. Lack of support systems, including childcare and generally a lack of jobs, were among the most important obstacles discussed. Long commutes and fear about walking around in the neighborhood were also mentioned.

Many interviewees could not articulate a dream job or career goal. They had difficulty answering ‘What is your dream job?’ questions. And no interviewees identified increased earning potential as a desirable goal. Dream jobs included feminized employment, such as a career in social work and, most frequently, opening their own daycare center. Amber is a 50-year-old African American woman living in a low-income housing project. She was court-ordered to take classes at Association House. Amber explained her dream job as follows:

I like to help people. I like to be around older people and take care of them because I know they can't take care of themselves. I don't know . . . because they can't help themselves, especially the ones in a nursing home. I used to work in a nursing home, down the street from my house and they hired me to be an activity . . . you know, play games and stuff with them. You know, some of those nurses aren't really any good for older people. They don't treat them right until the state come and check up, then they do everything right. But soon they leave and go back to their regular thing. Nobody come by and see them or nothing, though. Their family don't come by and visit them so I sit down and talk to them because they look so sad and I have to leave them and go home. And I see them the next day, though.

A desire for independence—wanting to be one's own boss or wanting to have greater authority over one's labor—was a recurring theme in our interviews. Interestingly, this value was expressed across race and social class. Here is how Bernice, a 33-year-old Latina woman, who plans on going to college and currently works as an orthodontist assistant, described her dream job:

You know, I was raised being told you can do whatever you want, whatever you want, you can be whoever you want, you're not limited by the fact you're a female. So, um . . . you know I don't think I've ever felt that I didn't get something that I deserved 'cause a male was up for the same job. Um . . . and I've never really felt that that's something that I can't do because I'm a female.

A very similar response came from Carmen. Carmen is 38 and works part time in a department store. She has been out of school for 24 years and has decided to get her GED in order to find a new job or secure her current one. Carmen expressed extreme pride in advancing to level two reading. She worked diligently on her class work and explained that getting her GED is an incredibly important personal goal, as is being her own boss:

I would love to not have a boss. I would love that. That's one of the big, huge reasons why I want to be an entrepreneur, to have my own business, cause I want to be the person that's in charge, not that I'm bossy or that I want to rule everything but I want to be like running my own stuff. I want to say how it goes and where it should be and you know stuff like that.

In contrast, the middle class women we spoke to had very definite ideas about their dream jobs. The qualities of these jobs were tied to having control over one's labor. Tanja had nothing but positive things to say about her current position. When we asked about her ideal working situation, she said she likes 'not having to answer to anyone'. Being her own boss seemed like too much responsibility. But she dreamed of opening her own daycare. Having her own business would bring all the aspects of a dream job together: authority over her labor, intellectual challenges, job flexibility, responsibility, and the pride that comes from being able to balance household obligations and work.

Discussion

A number of compelling examples surfaced during our interviews that crystallized the differences between the interviewees. Differences among participants were encoded in part by their educational histories, which in turn shaped their ideas about the meanings and most important aspects of work, their aspirations for the future, and how they balance work with household obligations. And the Humboldt Park neighborhood itself ultimately reinforced these differences in terms of differential access to a variety of resources including education, social networking, safe working and living environments, and other support systems.

Women's ideas about the most important aspects of their employment invariably focused on the notion of flexibility, a cultural value linked to self-reliance and independence, despite also being a mantra that employers recite as code for denying full-time employment benefits. Broadly defined, flexibility has become central to the discussion of women's participation in the labor market. The concept was introduced to offset the *inflexibility* of Fordist production, a system of mass production associated with Henry Ford's rigidly hierarchical, assembly-line employment environment. In less lofty terms, our interviewees coveted *flexibility* as a means to reconcile their workplace obligations and career trajectories with their domestic obligations.

Recognizing the different expressions of this deep-seated cultural value among our participants—negotiable working hours and desirable location on one end of the continuum and intellectual fulfillment and personal growth on the other—not all our participants were able to negotiate flexibility in their employment. The similarities among the participants were expressed in their desire for having more control over their labor output. The differences were expressed in terms of the participants' varying abilities to negotiate the terms of their employment.

Closely associated with flexibility was a yearning for independence and authority over one's labor. This yearning was expressed uniformly across race and class divides. The shared value of independence is linked to the fact that, notwithstanding their differences, these women, like many in the United States, are the beneficiaries of the women's movement. We noted sharp disparities among the interviewees, however, in actually achieving the desired flexibility. The middle class women in our study enjoyed more autonomy and flexibility in their jobs. And they generally had fewer household responsibilities, a characteristic they share with their middle class male counterparts. To give just one example of the disparity between these groups, some participants were able to afford housecleaners while others did not even have home access to washer-dryers and

other appliances that the middle class women took for granted. We also observed marked differences between the goal of obtaining *jobs* versus *careers* as expressions of one's social standing and class aspirations. This notwithstanding, work—including housework—remained a core feature of *all* the participants' identities.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the interviews highlight a diversity of lived experiences and some parallels among the interviewees. More importantly, the interviews provide a platform for illustrating the intersectional approach. But what is it about the intersectional approach that enables one to draw these kinds of inferences about the working lives of middle and working class women of different races? Because the intersectional approach examines the interaction of class, race and gender, it provides an analytic framework that reflects how these categories are organically tied together in the lives of the interviewees.

Gender analysis alone cannot explain why women with less social and cultural capital have fewer job prospects. Nor can it account for why such women think differently from privileged women about their careers and private lives. Likewise, class-based or race-based analyses (e.g. Marxism and critical race theory, respectively) come up short in this regard because they treat categories like class and race as though they can be teased apart and examined in a vacuum. Even an analysis that treats the categories of gender, race, and social class sequentially or separately is ultimately deficient. Such analyses artificially extract one or another of these categories for exclusive attention, and thus inevitably miss how the intersection of race, class and gender reproduces and cements the inequalities in the working lives of women, while also mediating what, in this study, turned out to be profoundly different experiences of the meaning of work and visions of a shared neighborhood.

The current social and economic upheavals in the Humboldt Park neighborhood amplify the different ways in which women relate to the neighborhood and negotiate a sense of self. Humboldt Park's economic transformation, brought on largely by the downsizing of the local labor market, is reflected by the dramatically different experiences of women in the neighborhood. Redevelopment efforts, for example, benefit women who have recently relocated to the area, but not working class women. And the disappearance of neighborhood industrial jobs has presented additional obstacles for working class women to negotiate.

Single mothers have been hit hardest by these changes. The loss of employment close to home all but precludes their full participation in the labor market. Many such women in the GED program had to take public transportation, which meant a daily three-hour commute. This, along with the absence of affordable daycare, placed additional stress on their housework responsibilities.

Working class women's fear of being robbed or assaulted in their neighborhood—central to their perception of Humboldt Park—reflected their desire to protect their children and themselves from the oppression that marks their everyday lives. Middle class women were largely insulated from such fears. Their relative insouciance toward the neighborhood, and ability to drive to work, suggests that living in Humboldt Park did not diminish their sense of well-being. On the contrary, living in the Humboldt Park neighborhood provided middle class women with an opportunity to increase their symbolic capital and material

investments. For example, these women were able to proudly foreswear ‘yuppie’ or ‘cookie-cutter’ neighborhoods like Lincoln Park or Lakeview, while still enjoying the lower housing costs that allowed them to increase their rate of material consumption.

These are precisely the sort of difference that are invisible to a universalist approach that insists on employing a monolithic conception of oppression, and a one-dimensional notion of gender that glosses over the economic and other social forces that individuate women’s different experiences of a neighborhood like Humboldt Park. As I have shown, there is no one way in which Humboldt Park women form a sense of self or connect with their local neighborhood. Indeed, women’s work, living arrangements, and perceptions of the neighborhood are metaphors for differential access to resources. They are also metaphors for class and race relations and ongoing struggles with encroaching developers. Working class women have not been mere bystanders in this process. As the study has shown, the majority of our interviewees were in the process of changing their lives by obtaining marketable skills and thereby expanding their social capital.

Note

1. Pierre Bourdieu differentiates between cultural capital (forms of knowledge, skills, education and advantages) and social capital (resources based on social networks and class) and symbolic capital (prestige, honor, and recognition). Cultural capital is mostly employed in relation to the education system.

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