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Connecting Poverty, Culture, and Cognition: The Bridges Out of Poverty Process

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ABSTRACT
This article highlights how one nonprofit organization deals with the controversial issue of culture and poverty through its interactions with low-income individuals. Through interviews and participant observation, we analyze its curriculum and process, which focuses on helping participants become more reflexive by analyzing their past life and potential futures through a social class analysis. At the same time, we discuss a key theoretical debate over culture and action/agency. Specifically, we examine the distinction between practical and discursive consciousness (or declarative and non-declarative culture), and issues of agency. We show how this theoretical process is accomplished in the organization by providing people with the opportunity to change their habits, skills, "cultured capacities" and "repertoires," which can help them get out of poverty. We also show other factors, such as social support, are crucial and how the overall process works more for some than for others.

KEYWORDS
Cultural sociology; poverty; poverty alleviation; social justice; case study

Although there has been a massive amount of writing on poverty by sociologists, topics related to culture and the person, such as agency, motivation, self-efficacy, and connections to culture have often been gingerly sidestepped and undertheorized. Some of this is due to the legacy of the 1960s culture of poverty debates, as scholars have overextended the initially reasonable critiques of this concept (Patterson, 2010; Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010; Vaisey, 2010). Although these factors have been studied by some sociologists (e.g., Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Wilson, 1996), honest and in-depth discussions of how people work toward upward mobility and how they respond to interventions that are designed to help them are still not given much consideration in the sociology and social work literature.

To help remedy this, we discuss a national antipoverty organization, Bridges Out of Poverty ("Bridges" hereafter) that helps people move toward upward mobility. After summarizing its curriculum, we describe how the program attempts to help participants construct a different "future story." We then ask, "How do people respond to a particular intervention designed
to reconsider their thoughts about their circumstances and behaviors?” We consider the impact of Bridges’ activities on the people it serves and highlight three ways it affects people. First, we find that many participants learn to label past and current experiences of living in poverty, and second, it offers them new options that could enable them to overcome poverty in the long run, while also helping them practice these new behaviors and make plans for change. Third, the group support is crucial for the participants. We then also pose the related question, “Why does this kind of process work for some but not others?” Here, we illustrate cases in which the Bridges curriculum is ineffective and show how these participants’ lives are characterized by fewer personal resources (e.g. self-efficacy) and a functioning social support system. We contextualize our findings with recent theoretical developments on the link between culture and action.

**Culture, Cognition, and the Emerging Role of Nonprofits**

Given ongoing major national discussions over poverty, what helps people “get ahead” and how can institutions use these insights? Common answers include the availability of jobs and cognitive factors such as deficits in education and job skills, but recent research indicates that numerous noncognitive factors are often just as or more important (Heckman, 2011), such as variations in social developmental aptitudes, effortful control (Lengua et al., 2014), planning skills (Crook & Evans, 2014), grit (Duckworth & Gross, 2014), motivation and perseverance (Heckman & Rubinstein, 2001), and overlapping factors like integrity, resourcefulness, and ambition (Tough, 2012), all of which influence a person’s agency. These factors are connected to the cultural patterns and networks that people are socialized into, which takes us into the rich work on cultural and social capital, and how these factors affect mobility (Bourdieu, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Rivera, 2012; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008). The focus of Bridges is on socioeconomic class differences, and they help people understand the importance of these factors and how they are related to their lives, as we see below.

Although some acknowledge the role of self and collective efficacy and cultural patterns in people’s experiences of poverty (Boardman, Finch, Ellison, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Sampson et al., 1997; Wilson, 1996), the focus of these studies is largely on how poverty undermines these factors on the individual (Wilson, 1996) or collective levels (Sampson et al., 1997), rather than on how upward mobility actually works (Horowitz, 2011), or how people respond to programs designed to help them get out of poverty. This is the piece of the puzzle we want to focus on. We argue that programs like Bridges help us see what is involved in the process of change at local and microlevels and, most importantly, from the perspectives of those who struggle with poverty themselves. Broadly similar programs that teach “life skills” exist around the country, and though they may not handle social class differences as directly as Bridges,
many in effect teach practices that ideally give people more life options. One can include numerous mentoring and coaching programs in communities and in social service organizations such as Catholic Charities, Love Inc. (many with forms of case management), specific programs used nationally (e.g. “family development,” Circles, STRIVE, LIFT), or a number of other popular and varied programs that focus on finances and try to hammer on middle-class values of planning, saving, and cost cutting, such as courses tied to individual development accounts (IDAs). Among other things, these programs attempt to help those dealing with poverty “navigate” the middle-class world better. They are designed to allow entry into that world, by focusing on the rules of the middle-class practice that one needs to know to thrive in the dominant culture or take steps in that direction. In essence, these organizations play a mediating role between the contrasting worlds of the poor and that of the neoliberal world of work and institutions.

This key piece of the inequality puzzle, however, is controversial and often avoided by scholars, which is in stark contrast to the popularity of these programs at local levels. Ever since the culture of poverty debates in the 1960s, there has been a strong taboo against connecting culture and behavior to poverty (Khan, 2012, p. 368; Small et al., 2010). Even in newer work on culture and poverty, actual practices and habits and their connections with poverty are played down, partly out of a fear of “blaming the victim” or in fear of political fallout from the culture of poverty debates (Patterson, 2010), and also because of a hesitance to address differing subcultural norms and practices and social class differences (Fosse & Patterson, 2015; Patterson, 2014). That is, concepts of agency that involve self-reflexivity and daily habits and ethics are often simply left out of consideration, as Laidlaw (2002) observes. In addition, the programs’ focus on what people can actually do to get out of poverty may imply that poverty is a person’s own fault, and that middle-class values and practices are better than that of lower class, violating (rather selective) preferences for relativism among academics, and also popular academic discourses on victimization. There is a problem, however, as anthropologist Richard Shweder (2003) argues, when “victimization becomes the dominant account of suffering” which “depersonalizes the sufferer,” who is encouraged to think and act as a passive victim with few personal capabilities. Shweder argues that people “need to be aware of whatever degree of personal control they have over their own conditions” (pp. 128–9). Peter Hall and Michèle Lamont (2013), in their recent volume on social resilience in neoliberal times, call for studies of social processes that “allow individuals to negotiate new environments in flexible and ambitious ways” (p. 23). Programs like Bridges are a prime example of this.

To highlight these issues and processes, we will first focus on how Bridges fosters reflexivity and influences participants to start the process of change toward improving their lives. That is, we show how participants connect discursive culture to practical consciousness and gain a deeper understanding of
their situations while doing so. We also show that participants are made aware of new models of action (such as “formal register”), and how they learn to practice them. We then tackle the (related) question of why Bridges works for some but not for others. Our research question is related to debates over how culture works on people. Ann Swidler (2001) highlights “cultural repertoire,” consisting of habits, styles, and skills, which are held together by a “larger worldview,” a “configuration of codes, contexts and institutions” that links culture and action (pp. 79, 180). Repertoire describes the ability to shift into a new mode at various times, but it can be ephemeral or temporary, like expatriates who learn a second culture though never really claim it as their own. Her overall idea of culture as a “toolkit” posits that culture structures “the patterns” that normally form action, by enhancing or delimiting people’s “strategies of action” (Swidler, 2001, pp. 69, 82). However, she does not view the actor as directly motivated by goals and values, and the approach has been criticized as using a “weaker” form of culture (Vaisey, 2009). Recently Lizardo and Strand (2010) have taken an in-depth look at Swidler’s (2001) toolkit theory, comparing it with what they call the “strong practice theory perspective” in cultural sociology. In essence, they argue that even though both approaches show important differences, they complement each other and can be used together to explain certain phenomena:

Both toolkit and strong practice theories agree that most culture is implicit and exists at the levels of skills, habits, fast dispositions and implicit classificatory schemes. However, empirical applications of the toolkit approach have primarily dealt with agents own discursive accounts of how they manage to integrate divergent ‘bits’ of explicit culture into their everyday attempts to craft strategies of action. Strong practice theory on the other hand, focuses on global patterns of behavioral coherence that are seen to be the result of choices made in the practical state, of which any discursive justification or explanation would be a very poor (predictive) source of information. (Lizardo & Strand, 2010, p. 215)

This distinction between discursive and practical consciousness is key, because they are utilized at some times more than others. In “stable” times, discursive consciousness relies on objectified structures “to generate lines of action” and is employed when justifying an action or when using “vocabularies of motive.” In “unstable” times, however, after a period of unsuccessfully holding on to the older patterns, “cognitively costly” searches for “novel explicit cultural patterns” are begun. Conversely, practical consciousness is characterized by an “ontological complicity” between embodied habits and skills and objectified institutional orders” in stable circumstances and by “the acquisition of new habits and skills” or a “readjustment of future expectations” in unstable times (Lizardo & Strand, 2010, pp. 215–223). In other words, we rely on already existing structures (e.g., reliance on family) in stable times, but in unstable times, we may look for other sources of support or ideas (new friends, religions, jobs, other institutions) that we may not have utilized before. The distinction
between discursive and practical consciousness is a basic construct of “dual-process theory” (Vaisey, 2009).  

This helps us understand how people plan and take steps for life change, called “life course agency” (Hitlin & Elder, 2007, pp. 182–183). Life course agency implies that people are “constructing changing images of where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there” that also enables actors to “loosen themselves from past patterns of interaction and reframe their relations to existing constraints” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, pp. 984, 1010). In Bridges’ terms, this is “constructing a future story,” a concrete plan to begin changing one’s life, which matches well with recent research on agency (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015). Part of this process involves increased reflexivity (Archer, 2007). It also encompasses self-efficacy, “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” regarding various aspects of well-being and behavior. Self-efficacy often “determines how much effort people will expend and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences” (Bandura, 1977, p. 141).

**Case and Method**

Because we are interested in how people respond to a particular intervention designed to reconsider their thoughts about their circumstances and behaviors, we chose an organization that addresses these issues. We considered Bridges to be an ideal case to study our research question. We did participant observation for 2 years (primarily attending Getting Ahead [GA] classes, but also trainings, meetings, and other activities), and conducted and analyzed 39 interviews of graduates of the program (after they had completed the class), all in a midwestern U.S. city. Participant observation allowed us to record actual behavior and changes. At the same time, by analyzing interviews, we were able to gather what participants say about the program (after they had completed it), how and why they responded to it, and how they then attempted to change their lives, examining how the process works and what happens when it does not. Thus, we think that the combination of participant observation and interviews helps us tackle the question from different angles as the recent methodological debate over ethnography versus in-depth interviews reveals (Lamont & Swidler, 2014).

We utilized case study research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Ragin & Becker, 1992) to understand how participants respond to this intervention. In this context, the various interviews were analyzed with respect to the influence Bridges had on them. We analyzed the first 10 interviews, coming up with a set of codes for each. Once we coded these first few interviews, we compared and contrasted them, coming up with a set of shared codes, such as perception of GA, personal background, experiences with poverty, progress after the completion of GA, among others. We then analyzed the rest of the interviews,
coding each of them, and then contrasted them with the codes established from the first few interviews, in an iterative process involving induction and deduction. The interviews were all taped and analyzed.

As criteria for being successful versus not successful (the outcome we are interested in) we rated the various participants on how far they have come with accomplishing the goals they set for themselves (coming up with a plan for future progress was part of the Bridges curriculum, as described above). For some this was finding employment or stable housing, for others it was improving their saving habits or credit score or going back to school. We thus rated individuals as successful (18), modestly successful (17), or not successful (4) based on whether they able to follow through with their individual plans. This also means that there is no absolute standard for success, but what counts are the changes each individual has made.

**Description of Participants**

The sample in this study consisted of 10 male and 29 female participants of various ages from the early twenties to their sixties. The majority (24) of the participants interviewed were African American, some were White (13), with only two Latinas, which mirrors the GA participants overall. The participants also differ in their experiences with poverty in childhood and adolescence: Whereas many (19) clearly have a background of generational poverty (i.e., their parents and sometimes grandparents experienced poverty), some of the participants (14) came from working-poor or middle-class families, and descended into poverty due to unfortunate circumstances such as living in an abusive relationship or mental health issues. The backgrounds of the remaining six participants were either a mix of generational and situational poverty (e.g., after a divorce, one parent stayed poor, and another was better off) or it did not become clear in the course of the interview.

**The Getting Ahead Curriculum and Classes**

Out of Poverty nonprofit utilizes a “Getting Ahead” course, “networking meetings” and other activities to encourage participants to consider their “mental map” and associated behaviors that go with it, set goals, and work toward a more stable life. The course consists of 15 classes of at most 3 hours each. A facilitator and a cofacilitator are teaching the class together, with one or both of them having a background of poverty or being an earlier graduate of the class. The course is offered at different organizations, usually nonprofits such as the YWCA, Goodwill, or homeless centers, but also other organizations like schools. The course and its main workbook, *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin’-By World* (DeVol, 2004), focus on understanding the “hidden rules of economic class,” the 11 different kinds of “resources” (financial,
emotional, mental, formal register, spiritual, integrity and trust, physical, support systems, relational, motivation and persistence, and knowledge of hidden rules), and how to create a plan to build these resources “for a better life.” Translating this into sociological language, one can match many of these resources with the various “capitals” (human, social, financial) commonly used in social science (Ellis, 2000).

In general, Bridges uses a collaborative, participative model where the participant “coinvestigators” are asked to consider differences in how people in poverty, the middle class, and wealth structure and orient their lives, dwelling especially on the “hidden rules” of class. It can be an emotional process, as participants examine their own experience of economic class in America, and how they are often disadvantaged by the dominant practices (e.g., language codes, assumptions one has a car, or insurance). Other aspects of the curriculum give participants insights and tools for understanding their own personal journey, revealing where trauma, relationships, poor choices, and other dynamics, sometimes within their control, sometimes not, have affected their lives. One key is that no one is telling them where they went wrong or who is responsible, for it is left to the discovery of each person to put his or her life into perspective. Once that process happens, the hope is that it opens the door to setting out on a different path. Thus, the class in essence encourages participants to offer a self-critique of their lives, their background, and a concrete plan of where they are going in the future. As one of the facilitators in a class we attended repeatedly said, “We are not here to tell you what you need to do, but help you find out for yourselves.” However, far from being focused on individual behavior only, the class also analyzes participants’ communities and wider socioeconomic structures and obstacles, with modules addressing inequality, transportation, affordable housing, and issues of exploitation. Combining the two perspectives, participants create a personal and community plan that could include political/social action. Bridges is also attempting to strengthen its links with area employers through an “employer resource network” to help participants (usually with spotty work backgrounds) obtain and retain jobs. After the class has finished, graduates are encouraged to use the newly acquired skills, practices, and insights to follow through with the plan they developed for themselves during the class, which could mean completing a Graduate Equivalency Diploma, looking for work, going to back to college, handling one’s finances better, dealing with substance abuse issues, or becoming more involved in community issues. Participants were also encouraged through networking meetings to interact with people from other social classes, thereby increasing their bridging capital.

Analysis: Providing the Conditions for Reflexivity and Change

How does the Bridges process affect its participants? To understand this question, we trace how participants respond to Bridges through interviews, combined with participant observation of GA classes. Below we argue that many
Bridges participants are (1) gaining insight into their backgrounds with the help of theoretical models and (2) often acquire new skills and practices. As we will see, what participants gain through Bridges also differs according to whether participants originated from generational poverty or experienced situational poverty. At the same time, we also highlight the group processes that contribute to this. Overall, we are making a distinction between those who seem to benefit from the Bridges curriculum and those who do not (or to a lesser degree). To this end, we want to examine the contributions of “cultural tools” and “practical consciousness” in this realm (Lizardo & Strand, 2010).

“Putting a Name on It”: Labeling

First—and perhaps most importantly—Bridges helps participants make connections between their existing habits, skills and patterns of actions, and thought styles they grew up with or have acquired throughout their lives (what Lizardo & Strand, 2010, call “practical consciousness”) and the “discursive knowledge” (or “declarative consciousness”) of different social classes. That is, the class provides what could be called the “conditions for reflexivity.” In general, class facilitators encourage participants to compare the contrasting orientations of the middle class with those from lower incomes. Although this can verge on negative stereotyping, most of these distinctions emerged from the participants themselves, were not forced by the two facilitators of the course (at least one of whom comes from poverty), and were allowed to be debated or countered. For example, participants pointed out that those in poverty often concentrate strongly on relationships, entertainment, and living in the moment, whereas those in the middle class are focused more on achievements. They discuss whether they may need to change friendships or networks, to improve their situations. Participants and facilitators also talked about contrasts between present and future orientation. In this class setting the comparisons are necessarily simplistic but in general match what various scholars have said about the diversity and different orientations of groups in poverty (Archer, 2007; Hannerz, 2004; Harding, 2007; Salcedo & Rasse, 2012; Sánchez-Jankowski, 2008).

One’s social class is manifested in everyday “practical consciousness” and is largely unconscious or nondeclarative. For those participants who can make use of the Bridges curriculum, the GA class makes it become declarative and opens up other models that were not plausible before. Being able to describe an experience with words (declarative culture) enables one to critically reflect on it (Freire, 2000) and to envision a different future (Mische, 2012). This process is part of what Archer (2007) calls reflexivity.

Those participants whom we termed “successful” or “moderately successful” gained a deeper understanding of their past and aspects of their lives that could be changed and then subsequently undertook steps to improve their
situations such as finding a new job, or going back to school, or even just improve their saving habits and their credit score. However, in most cases, even what we call “successful” involves improvements that are modest, which is partly due to the huge barriers people face when they want to improve their social class standing. One would think that this would happen only for those from generational poverty, but even those from situational poverty often gained important insights into how past behavioral patterns (e.g., being part of an abusive relationship or hanging out with the wrong crowd) contributed to their current situations.

This realization and critical reflection of where one is at, including the associated mismatches between one’s circumstances and practices, was directly observed at GA. On one fall evening, the goal of the class is to fill out a worksheet that evaluates one’s “financial resources” such as whether they are working, have debt, transportation and insurance. At first we do it all together, and Cherianne, the facilitator, tells the participants to put a check mark wherever it applies. Then someone says, “We can do it ourselves,” and Cherianne responds,

Okay, this is what you have to do until you leave—fill out the survey with all the resources, marking where you are at, and at the end, fill in your score in all these areas. You can take a break now, go out for a smoke, get some more cheesecake or coffee, but by the time you leave it has to be done.

Next to one of the researchers, a young African American male in his early twenties says, “This is bad, yes, I need a break” and leaves the room, most likely for a smoke or just some fresh air. Other people get up, go outside, chat a bit or get more coffee, but then one by one come back and start working on their lists. We notice how the atmosphere in the room changes from people going in and out and making jokes to working with concentration on their surveys, considering their situations, and becoming more self-reflective. In this and subsequent classes, participants also seemed to become more relaxed with each other, sharing insights as they immersed themselves in the material.

Getting participants to step back from their lives and consider where they are and what role or responsibility they have for their lives is the first aim of the GA class. In theoretical terms, it involves enabling the participants to become reflexive and framing the nondiscursive “practical consciousness” of their everyday lives in terms of the wider categories of the different class models and practices that they may only be dimly aware of (“discursive knowledge”). And indeed, the change noticed in the participants once they started digging deeply and with concentration into their lives was stark. For some, what one facilitator succinctly called a “letting go of the fate mentality” happens during GA classes (but not for all, as we see below). Participants reflect on their situations and life histories and realize that there are other and perhaps better ways to live. Gradually they get a better assessment of
where they presently stand and in which areas they need to and are capable of making improvements.

However, some GA participants more than others realize that their existing “practical consciousness” prevents them from adapting to the reality of social life and improving their situations. That is, not all of them realize that they are in a precarious position, and not all are capable of deep reflexivity and of reforming their practical consciousness, due to existing insecurities, trauma histories, and limitations, which we discuss more below. To illustrate how this works in ideal cases, we want to highlight the example of Claire, a woman we categorized as “successful.” She is a red-haired White middle-aged woman who grew up in generational poverty and is currently residing in a Catholic Worker house, where she has found a sort of permanent home, but is also planning to go back to school the coming fall. She told us about her life, starting with her childhood experiences:

I grew up in poverty. Very poor. We moved 12 times in a year one time. I got pregnant at 14, got married, had my first child at 15. Went hungry a lot. I remember as children we would take half of our food home so we could feed our parents because we had the free lunch. We always went to school hungry. Summers were spent working in the fields picking food and then we would can so we had something for the winter. Almost always there was at least one utility off. We never had heat electric and water all at the same time. It was always a struggle. You adapt if you don’t know anything different. Unfortunately, I took a lot of that with me while I was raising my children. Now I’m watching my children do the same things and be in the system and getting food stamps and welfare.

The above quote reveals how the “practical consciousness” of growing up in poverty stayed with her and influenced her throughout her adulthood, eventually affecting her children. At a later age in her life, she actively tried to improve her circumstances by attempting to “get an education” though, in her own view, she never really left poverty behind because even when doing well (working three jobs and owning a house), she did not plan for the future and suffered during the recent recession when she lost jobs and had nothing to fall back on. GA enlightened and helped her precisely because she could put her experience of generational poverty and her past attitudes into words (called the “Aha-moment” in GA classes):

Yes, my Aha-moment was learning about generational poverty was like the wake-up call. Then I look at it and I’m like I have 5 grandkids and I don’t want them to grow up in poverty. I want them to learn how to live this life and I don’t want them to think it’s okay, that it’s acceptable to not strive for better.

And even though at the time of the interview she still did not have full-time employment, she was planning to go back to school, and her life is now relatively stable and she is content:
Now I am living in a community with Catholic Workers. It’s a very spiritual community. I asked God to help me with this and he just picked me up and put me right in it. I’m literally surrounded by it. I feel like I’m filling up with goodness. Financially, I work at a grocery co-op. I get a stipend. It’s not much only $100 per month. But I have a little bit of an income. It’s not where I would want to be but it’s definitely a start.

In other words, she is an example of someone who could translate her “practical consciousness” into a “cultural tool,” enabling her to critically reflect on the former. This process of “putting a name on it” could be observed among many other graduates directly and was told in later interviews, such as with an African American mother of three (Anna, “moderately successful”) in her thirties, who focuses on being a good mother and her children’s educational success, improved her physical health due to Bridges, plans to take up college again, and later on found full-time employment:

For me, my Aha moment was because I make these changes in my life. I don’t know how to put words to it or say this is what I did. I always learn in a backwards pattern. I would say, “oh, that’s what you call what I did.” So I was able to learn a few things naturally but I didn’t know how to put it in words. That was really good for me it made me feel better.

**Learning and Practicing**

Second, those participants on whom Bridges had a positive effect learned how to utilize new “cultural tools” and connect them to “practical consciousness” (Lizardo, 2013; Lizardo & Strand, 2010), in effect giving them new models for dealing with life situations. In class, this happens mostly at first in theory, but as the weeks go on, some participants also learn how to apply the newly found insights and skills to their lives. Thus, Bridges provides participants with the conditions not only for reflexivity (as above), but also the conditions to learn about and to practice new models of living.

Through this process, Bridges participants can start distancing themselves from former patterns associated with living in poverty. They became aware of and learned new skills, which when practiced can become aspects of a new practical consciousness. In effect, participants see that dominant middle-class society utilizes a set of patterns, such as formal language and register in job settings, a focus on education, and measured spending practices, and that adopting some of these patterns will help get them out of poverty, similar to what Patterson and Rivers (2015) report among inner-city youth in job training programs. Participants and facilitators also talked about differing orientations to time depending on social class, and how one has to adjust one’s orientation to time by focusing on the future when desiring a steady job and building savings. Furthermore, the course itself requires participants to come to class regularly, on time, and to engage with the homework, their
fellow classmates and the instructors. In one class, participants gathered for a meal at an upscale local restaurant that required “good manners,” which was mentioned by one interviewee as being very helpful.

We can see this process in GA classes, and it is also seen by following up through interviews with those who have already completed the class. In Claire’s case (above), the class not only contributed to her reflexivity but also gave her the tools and skills to change the underlying mind-set that—as she told us—pushed her back into poverty as soon as her circumstances changed. Elena, an older African American (“moderately successful”) with a background of generational poverty, also illustrated the process of learning about register and of improving her spending and saving habits as she tried to implement some of what she learned:

They show you how to get yourself out of poverty and some of the ways that you can do that, middle-class rules and things like that, which come out in things like when you present yourself when you go to a job interview and things like that. It don’t matter if you’re going for a secretary job or a Burger King job you should still, not because you’re going to Burger King, “okay I can wear the faded jeans” versus if I’m going for the secretary job I’ll put on my panty hose or you know things like that. I learned a lot about that, it now makes sense to me that the person interviewing you actually looks at the way you dress and how you talk and your body language and things like that. That was one of the important parts of the class to me to really know the difference of how to present myself when I’m going out to different occasions.... That’s something that I really picked up on and that I do use in my everyday living now with my kids and in my household. (...) I would try to get away to build my finances, how could I go around building my finances, and what goals I need to set for myself to build my finances, or what things I need to eliminate. We got like in the classes, some people would say, well even though they have income they couldn’t make it because they would go through these check places, and get a no. They figure out, they rent things from Rent-a-Center, that can cost you money, and you figure out how much money you’re paying Rent-a-Center when you can actually try to save that money, put it in an envelope, save what you put on bills, save what you put on households, other stuff.

Similarly, take the example of Heather (categorized as “successful,” with a background in generational poverty), an older African American woman who for most of her adult life had been a cook, lacks educational resources and struggles with financial difficulties. When she heard of GA, she was enrolled in a local community college. At the time of the interview, and with the support of Bridges, she was working toward establishing her own catering business (besides working other jobs). She also told us about gaining helpful information about the various social classes and related practical skills gained through her participation in GA. The quotes below show how she learned about new models and then starts implementing some of what she learned (which also included becoming better at saving and cutting unnecessary consumption):
When you go out in public, you have to know how to deal with people. So yes, any caliber people whether they are professionals I will be able to deal with them and talk with them well enough not using broken English and if I do, I keep talking . . . I listen and I repeat things I see on TV to help me and just to continue. It helped me because when we took this test [on different class patterns] I said, I don’t want to feel like, I don’t want to use the words dumb or ignorant, but like I don’t know. But every move was a positive move. You just do your best. We found out that it wasn’t such a wrong answer when you took the test from the beginning and when you took it again at the end. It showed that you understand the different classes of people and so on and so forth. (. . .) So Bridges helped me greatly to just come on out and just stop being in that shell and . . . It’s where you put your mind. Clean those clothes up that you have, take care of you hygiene, settle you self with somebody who want to help you. Settle you self so when you do go looking for something you know that this is a job for you. This is your day. This is your day and you claim that. I’m coming out of this. I don’t care I’ve got this far. I was able to get this far and I’m gonna continue and I’m gonna reach the top where I want to be.

Another interviewee that made progress is Daniela (“successful”), a young African American mother of three. Despite being a felon and having stints of homelessness, she had gone back to school and was also working two part-time jobs at the time of the interview. She recounted learning that how she speaks to professors differs from how she talks with her friends. She learned how to budget her finances, is now more careful where she spends her money and later on started working at the local Bridges office. Likewise, Tricia (also counted as “successful,, and with a background of situational poverty), an early participant in Bridges, also attributes a lot of her motivation to the organization. Currently, she is “back in school,” works, and describes herself as an “entrepreneur of one” and as “happier” than ever before. However, she stresses that GA is really only the first step toward change, and that it should be followed by other programs.

The process of “rehabilitation” or “embodied reskilling” has been very undertheorized in sociology (Lizardo & Strand, 2010, pp. 222–223), though a few have touched on it, such as Lizardo (2013), who mentions how “doctrine, symbol and ritual are consciously used to establish a radical break with past non-declarative habits and simultaneously are put the task of, via repetition, re-embodying a new set of implicit skill” (p. 31), or Wacquant (2004, pp. 95–99) who in a “pugilistic” context describes the process of embodying new skills as one learns a new habitus. Along these lines, Heather tells us how some experiences she had in a Bridges setting help increase her self-confidence and skills:

Well even, I was asked, “would I be a table leader?” (lead discussion at a networking meeting). And boy, that feathered my head, made me feel so good. That I was able to talk and introduce and always sharing just doing the opening up to introduce yourself and some people are very shy. And just being in a crowd of people, just coming out,
just gettin’ out. I know that I’m going somewhere, I don’t have to wonder. And the class helped to bring that out, Bridges helped to bring that out.

One anthropologist, reading an early draft of this article, described the Bridges experience in ritual process terms. The class becomes a liminal state between the past life of the participant and a possible new stage and status. The postclass life is where the new outlook is tested and often met with numerous challenges and setbacks. It is during this postclass process where people really learn how to use and habituate the new practices in new contexts such as jobs. In the Bridges context, the postclass process has involved networking meetings, with more recent attempts to communicate with and help employers learn how to work with employees with spotty work histories and personal challenges (Bradley, 2003).

Sharing and Supporting

Third, many participants mentioned that the group context was an important part of GA classes, in combination with the processes above. We found that, for some, the group processes and social networks found in GA classes and the subsequent networking meetings can encourage self-reflexivity, self-efficacy (more on this later), agency, and the adoption of the new habits and skills (described under Points 1 and 2). For example, Sandra, a White woman in her fifties (who also was placed in the category of those who were successful in their attempts to change their lives), tells us about the group process she experienced originally as a participant and then later on observed in GA classes she cofacilitated:

Number one, I loved the camaraderie—loved the fact that the girls really turned into a sisterhood. We really got personal and there were times where there were tears and there were times when there was joy and laughter, you know, and we had a wonderful time and we did an assignment once and cutting out articles in the newspaper that would apply to poverty. I enjoyed that. That was wonderful.

In other parts of the interview, she connects the opening up that ideally happens in the group to the ability to revisit one’s life story, as she calls it, which for some is not an easy endeavor. She became very reflexive of her own background and life history in the course of the class and translated the new material into real accomplishments (the first one her graduation from GA).

The role of social support during the class was mentioned by many interviewees and also observed directly during several of the classes we visited (though more so by those with a background of generational poverty than by those with coming from situational poverty). This was very visible in one case, with a large shift in enthusiasm from the first through the fifth time it met. For this group, at what was thought to be the second meeting, we heard that this was in reality only the first meeting, because nobody had
shown up the first night (unlike most classes, this one was court ordered, consisting of people with drug offenses). Upon entering the class for the third week, we saw people eating together, and sensed camaraderie had developed. One Bridges office staff worker, who joined the class because she wanted to see for herself what the course was all about, prepared coffee for everyone (she brought her own coffee machine from home), which made people feel waited on and welcomed. This atmosphere continued through the upcoming weeks.

**Immobility: The Role of Personal Capacities and Resources**

As we have seen above, Bridges provides a group environment entailing conditions for reflexivity, the learning of new models and new information, and the practice of skills associated with the new models. Although we have presented cases we consider successful and moderately successful above, we can also gain insight into the process by contrasting them with what happens when the processes do not work well, that is, when people cannot follow through with the changes they envisioned themselves making.

Whereas Bridges provides the “conditions” for reflexivity and the learning of new models, information, and skills, the participants bring the “capacities” to use this environment with them to various degrees. Based on our research, we found that capacities consist of existing personal resources and a supportive social network (other than the Bridges group). Graduates’ existing personal resources comprise one’s general outlook, the degree of self-reflexivity, existing self-efficacy and skills, optimism and hope for the future, all aspects of “practical consciousness.” These resources, which are then built on in the class, enable them to gain something from the new models and/or to connect the new models and insights learned in GA to existing skills, habits, and thought patterns. Concurrently, supportive personal networks are important because they can support individuals’ efforts to persist in their efforts to change and to adopt new skills.

For some of those whose interviews revealed a higher degree of personal resources, we also found more social support from parents, grandparents, and even siblings while growing up, compared to those who did not. Experenced social support prior, during and after GA was thus tied to one’s degree of personal resources, in the sense that it enables people to see their own future in a more positive light and deal with setbacks.

When comparing our interviewees with each other, we found a few cases in which a “capacity for reflexivity” existed without the “learning of new skills,” or vice versa (see below). Among most of our interviewees whom we termed as “successful” (including Sandra, Claire, and Heather above), the two occurred together. That is, someone who becomes reflexive of his or her background is also more likely to take in and then adopt more of the skills...
taught in Bridges than someone who does not develop any reflexivity throughout the class. We also discovered a few cases in which neither reflexivity nor skills were acquired, and in this section we describe the background and characteristics of cases which do not fit the “successful or moderately successful cases” described above.

Dolores, for example, only marginally profited from the class in the area of skills and did not become more reflexive of past and present patterns (we categorized her as “unsuccessful” in following through with her plans to improve her life). She arrived late to our interview and seemed to have a hard time focusing throughout it, which may be due to her being tired and possibly depressed (along with the possibility of continued drug use or withdrawal symptoms). She took a GA class mandated by the drug court, which ended a few months before the interview took place. Growing up in poverty with several siblings, she does not describe her childhood negatively or as characterized by abuse but says that they all “turned out well.” However, she also mentions that her parents, even though both worked, still struggled financially, and that she did not have a lot of support from family members while growing up. In addition, her present life is not so rosy. She had a hard time holding on to jobs prior to GA, which was mostly due to her drug use, but encountered problems even afterwards:

I was hired, I was great, I didn’t care about doing drugs, I was able to function every day and I just knew that is was going to be the type of job that I need because people there . . . for some reason they didn’t like, and I was well they don’t like me, I mean I get along with everybody, working, I was hard, it was much to do, it was tiresome, and they say I wasn’t hired, I went there for three months, I was never absent and of course it was like a team survey and they said I didn’t have to come back and I was like . . . What in the world, I mean, why not? It really hurt and I was like, now what? I can’t work and I was something else we’ll find you something and it didn’t happen, and I let her know, lady, employer at the agency, I wasn’t even asking, I wasn’t, she said, Dolores, they said you didn’t fit, I mean and was that it?( . . .)

In general, Dolores’ answers indicate a low degree of self-reflexivity and of self-efficacy, a relatively pessimistic outlook for the future and lack of confidence, and a low fit between her and her work environment. At the time of the interview, she was planning to start her own cleaning business, and said that it was “looking good,” though she did not tell me about having a concrete plan other than planning to take a business class at some point in the future.

When we analyzed her interview, we realized that Dolores is not really making a connection between the content of GA and her past (nondeclarative or practical) behavior, skills, and knowledge. She did talk positively about the class, however, and focused on a few practical skills she gained, such as an improvement in her public speaking skills and the ability to
complete something she started. And even though she says she enjoyed the
class and mentions that it resembled family, she did not establish deep
friendships in it. Unlike other participants, she also did not have a strong
support network, which we think is related to her current family situation as
well as her familial background. Another participant, Louis, became more
reflexive of past maladaptive patterns, wanted to change, and also learned
some new information (e.g., about payday lenders) but did not adopt many
of the skills presented (such as language register or work habits). A Black
male in his thirties, he had grown up in poverty, had started to use drugs
early, and had been using drugs for some time and was court ordered to
attend the class. He came to class without much of the middle-class cultural
repertoire. Thus, one can say that some find it harder to take advantage of
the tools because, as Wacquant (2004) mentions about aspiring inner-city
boxers, they have lacked a background that provides a “regularity of life, a
sense of discipline, and physical and mental asceticism” (p. 44). In sum,
social support and existing personal resources, such as optimism, self-effi-
cacy, and self-reflexivity, determined whether participants could gain some-
thing from Bridges, regardless of whether they had a background of
generational or situational poverty (see Table 1).

There were differences, however, in what those from situational and
generational poverty learned from the class. Those from situational poverty
started out with more resources, as some of them already had a job or were
going back to school. They focused more on gaining insight into their
trajectories and on specific information that could be gained through the
class (e.g., insights about how to improve one’s health or financial assets).
Compared to those with a background of generational poverty, they focused
less on improving one’s general cultural repertoire or on the role of the group
in giving social support when recalling the class, probably because they
already possessed more features of the needed middle-class cultural repertoire
and more knowledge of it.

In addition, many participants (from generational and situational poverty)
also have additional personal barriers including disabilities, mental illnesses,
or substance abuse problems, which also mean that people sometimes

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<th>Table 1. Success After Bridges by Experienced Poverty Type.</th>
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<td>Success after Bridges by Poverty Type</td>
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<td>Total 39</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
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<td>Total 18</td>
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<td>Moderately successful</td>
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<td>Not successful</td>
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struggle to get any benefit from GA. In this vein, we found cases where the class neither contributed to reflexivity nor to learning about or adoption of practical skills, though this scenario seemed to be tied to physical or mental health issues. One man had a stroke not too long after going through GA, one woman suffered from a brain aneurysm, and a middle-age woman dealt with schizophrenia. (None of these participants really made any changes in their lives).

Other barriers, of course, remain, even if reflexivity, cultural tools, and future plans improve. When jobs are limited, or past felonies, credit problems, or discrimination make jobs hard to get, or when health, transportation, or family problems remain, making improvements is not easy, which may explain why even cases we termed successful were only moderately so (e.g., stories of Heather or Claire).

**Conclusion and Implications**

Programs like Bridges help us understand what is involved in taking initial steps to improve one’s life and potentially escape poverty. These programs, to put it in cultural theory terms, work as a tool that allow people to consider adopting new identities and the “cultural competencies to both perform the behaviors associated with the identities and to have the identity performances accepted by others” (Miles, 2014, p. 223). When this process changes “practical consciousness,” it involves an increase in self-confidence, a revisiting of older and malfunctioning patterns, a sense of getting at one’s purpose, and the learning of new behavioral patterns, and thus contributes to participants’ success in improving their lives. When it is purely “discursive,” it involves getting some information and knowledge out of the class but does not entail an actual change in habits and skills, leading to no real change in the lives of participants. The bonding that happens in a class mediates the “practical consciousness” aspects because for many it increases a sense of self-efficacy, self-confidence and hope, and potentially agency overall.

These processes are a crucial first element in the battle against poverty, but in the wider social scientific literature on poverty, they are often neglected. Yet there are a myriad of nonprofits out there that do this kind of relational work (Benjamin, 2012), and stratification scholars should be eager to examine these kinds of processes (Miles, 2014, p. 223). Bridges’ unique contribution is exactly that it focuses on these processes of self-reflexivity and learning about and practicing new models, though more formal evaluations will be needed to study whether programs like it definitively contribute to long-term improvement.6

The processes that contribute to generational poverty begin in early childhood; often involve family patterns, neighborhoods, and peers; and need to be addressed at all those levels. Programs such as the Harlem Children’s
Zone, which is slowly expanding to other areas, understand that cultural forces and patterns are important, and they attempt to work with families and children on, among other things, daily habits, interactional patterns, and education. Top-down policies that simply focus on cognitive or technical skills or provide training for jobs or education would have a stronger impact if combined with larger efforts that address noncognitive skills, especially the “resources” or various kinds of “capitals” (human, social, cultural), as James Heckman (2011) argues. One needs to consider the whole environment around individuals and families and consider the specific biographies of people (Jindra, 2014) to see how they will be affected by programs like Bridges that allow people to examine what influences them and then attempts to give them the tools to allow important life changes.

Many academics argue for policy changes to lower poverty and inequality. Yet this “top-down” view often ignores or underestimates the challenges presented by the life situations of those who haven’t been socialized into the historically particular mode of middle class productivity or of those who for various reasons find it difficult to keep up with it. Changing structures or offering opportunities does little to help people if they find it hard to take advantage of those opportunities. This is where nonprofits like Bridges (or many others across the country that offer mentoring or coaching) step in. We face not only structural issues with fewer high-paying jobs, but also intense cultural divisions (Jindra, 2014) that are heightened by segregation and isolation (Sampson, 2012). Breaking down these barriers and giving people more tools to use can be an important part of the battle against poverty and inequality.

Notes

1. Some have studied the complex relationships between cognition, goals, context, structural constraints, and mobility by pointing out the role of culture in forming expectations and goals for the future while considering the constraints people face for mobility (Abramson, 2012; Frye, 2012), for example, how educational ideals and expectations matter for poor and non-poor youth (Vaisey, 2010).

2. There are some similarities here with discussions in anthropology over the differential roles of nonconscious, habitual behavior and that of conscious choice and change (Robbins, 2007; Zigon, 2009). Some, however, criticize dual-process theory for not sufficiently considering the concept of active deliberation (Leschziner & Green, 2013; Mische, 2012).


4. This concept has been shown to be fruitful in diverse aspects of health such as the adherence to treatment (Burke, Dunbar-Jacob, & Hill, 1997), or coping with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

5. The early Bridges materials, written by Ruby Payne, received criticism for their generalizations (Froyum, 2010), but the materials have responded to this criticism and been
improved, and some of the criticism of Bridges, we argue below, is because some scholars reject any discussion of cultural or class differences.

6. This case can be representative of similar nonprofits, some of which we mention above, but with the diversity of nonprofits doing relational work, we hesitate to generalize about processes of change, since that is a wide, diffuse area (e.g., addictions). There is of course much work on personal transformation, much of it of the self-help variety, but our work is more focused on interactions with institutional environments, such as work. The process we describe encompasses a more sociological or social psychological approach to change.

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