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Review Of "Surviving Poverty: Creating Sustainable Ties Among The Poor" By J. M. Mazelis

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Methodological concerns aside, Williams's ethnographic approach (which he describes as "a personal art form" [p. xxiv]) yields a heartbreaking collection of data points on the life and, in some cases, death of troubled teens. To his credit, he clearly intends to put this personal art form to work in socially redemptive ways. I have come to think of this form of nonfiction storytelling as rhetorical pointillism. The author carefully places different dots on the canvas, but it is mostly left to the reader to stand back, squint a bit, and connect those dots into a meaningful whole. Some readers will find this an aesthetically pleasing and intellectually rewarding exercise. Others, much less so. Williams sketches out some of the larger implications in the afterword—including his arresting claim that self-harm constitutes a crucial rite of passage for American teens as they transition to adulthood—but the bulk of the book is given over to his highly impressionistic style.

I wonder whether the book advances our understanding of what drives teenage kids to suicide and self-harm. The answer to that question will depend in large part on what is meant by the word "understanding." For those who believe sociological understanding should be grounded in methodological and analytical rigor, the book will likely disappoint. For much of the book, Williams seems content to offer up vivid, writerly descriptions of what he has gleaned from years of what might be called compassionate observation, and there is no doubt that this constitutes a kind of understanding. The book offers insights but no new theories.

Williams says he wanted to write a book that would "confront our collective denial and constant need to blame the victim" (p. xiv) when it comes to suicide. That is an urgent goal, one I share with Williams, particularly when it comes to the soaring suicide rate among middle-aged Americans, whose rates are more than double the teen rate. While this book does little to advance existing research on suicide, it is written in a way that should enable it to gain wide readership. If it does, it could help stir the conscience of an apathetic nation in denial about our growing epidemic of self-destruction.

Surviving Poverty: Creating Sustainable Ties among the Poor. By Joan Maya Mazelis. New York: New York University Press, 2017. Pp xvii + 283. \$89.00 (cloth); \$28.00 (paper).

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We, as sociologists, know that poverty is primarily a social issue, not an individual failing. Many of us work to illuminate the ways in which social policy, U.S. history, and the vicissitudes of job and housing markets combine to trap many families in poverty, no matter how virtuous they are or how hard they work. Nonetheless, what Joan Maya Mazelis calls the "achievement ideology"—the belief that success is available to everyone if only they try hard enough—persists. In *Surviving Poverty*, Mazelis asks three important ques-

tions about poor Americans' engagement with this dominant narrative about poverty: How much do they believe poverty is their own fault, how does this affect their relationships and lives, and what can poor people working together do about all this?

Through extensive interviews with 50 poor Philadelphians, *Surviving Poverty* gives compelling answers to each of these questions. The first chapter demonstrates how much poor interviewees buy into the achievement ideology: blaming themselves for their poverty, blaming others who are poorer, and believing—often in the face of strong evidence to the contrary—that if they can just apply themselves and make the right choices, they should be able to escape the crushing poverty they are experiencing. The next chapter explains how achievement-ideology-infused shame about being poor combines with other aspects of poverty to make most poor respondents reluctant to give or receive help, except (sometimes) from close kin. Respondents tell Mazelis that they avoid forming social ties because they believe their need indicates a personal failing, because they do not feel safe in their neighborhoods, and because they and those around them have so little that they are not able to adhere to norms of reciprocity when help is asked for or granted.

These first two findings—the prevalence of achievement ideology among the poor themselves and the avoidance of the kind of social capital exchange that can ameliorate the worst deprivations of poverty—are important in their own right but are presented primarily to lay the groundwork for showing how meaningful the work of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU), an organization by and for poor people in Philadelphia, is for its members. Half the people Mazelis interviewed were KWRU members, and the book also relies on extensive participant-observation within the organization. Mazelis demonstrates the ways the KWRU combats achievement ideology so that poor people start to understand the structural, systemic forces underlying their poverty. One of the most powerful sections of the book includes quotes from KWRU members (pp. 110–13) describing the ways their perspectives on their own and others' poverty shifted as they learned that people all over the country faced similar conditions.

More important than that, however, are the ways KWRU helped its members survive with somewhat less deprivation than they might otherwise have faced. Mazelis describes how, for many members, KWRU meant the difference between housing and homelessness or between having enough to eat and going without. Through facilitating what Mazelis calls “sustainable ties,” KWRU helped members make their lives more liveable. While Matthew Desmond (*Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* [Crown Publishers, 2016]) finds only what he calls “disposable ties” in the poor communities he studied in Milwaukee, and the non-KWRU members in Philadelphia also mostly rely on disposable ties or family, Mazelis demonstrates how KWRU was able to facilitate longer-lasting, mutually beneficial, nonkin, *sustainable* ties. Because individuals who received help had a reciprocal obligation to the organization rather than to a particular individual, they were more likely to be able to repay that obligation (by volunteering at the office, going to protests, or helping other members with housing, food, or babysitting when

they were able). This group, rather than individual, reciprocity also allowed exchanges of help to feel less instrumental. The book thus makes an important contribution to literatures on both poverty and social capital: it is good to know that poverty does not make longer-term relationships of reciprocal assistance impossible and that an organization can facilitate poor people's ability to help themselves and each other.

I have a few quibbles with the book's approach: Mazelis sometimes uses academic buzzwords where more substantive vocabulary would be helpful (e.g., I wondered about relationships, acquaintances, and friends, not just "ties") and might give "neoliberalism" more direct causal power than is entirely accurate. But my main critique of the book is that I wanted more: in its effort to make its contribution about how "sustainable ties" were built, it does not give much empirical or theoretical attention to the other sociologically important aspects of KWRU as an organization. Much of what KWRU accomplished for its members went beyond sustainable ties: Mazelis reports that KWRU took over abandoned houses for its members, received substantial funding to rent additional houses for members, and organized protests to help members get needed benefits. While all of these accomplishments were possible because poor people worked together, they are not the kind of direct exchange Mazelis means by "sustainable ties" and might have lessons for (and from) studies of social movements as well.

Mazelis is careful throughout the book not to overstate what we can know from comparing non-KWRU members to members; the two groups were different in many ways, most centrally that KWRU members generally had experienced even severer poverty than nonmembers, which is often what led them to turn to the organization in the first place. The book nonetheless provides a compelling account of how KWRU members' lives would likely have been worse without KWRU and that much of what KWRU provided was these sustainable ties. Mazelis argues that if social service agencies adapted some of KWRU's policies and practices around reciprocity, they could both increase their reach and help empower those in poverty.

Midnight Basketball: Race, Sports, and Neoliberal Social Policy. By Douglas Hartmann. Chicago: University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2016. Pp. xiv+259. \$105 (cloth); \$35 (paper).

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In recent years, midnight basketball has become as much a part of the collegiate landscape as March Madness, the swoosh, and exploitation. Kicking off the season each year, midnight basketball is part celebration, part pep rally, and part commercial. While no longer happening as the clocks strikes 12 (profits increase at a more reasonable hour), the symbolic power of midnight basketball is clear.