

# The Dark Side of Agency: A Life Course Exploration of Agency among White, Rural, and Impoverished Residents of New York State

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.2.03>

## Keywords:

Agency; Family;  
Life Course; Rural;  
Poverty

**Abstract:** This study examines how people who have been constrained by extreme or chronic poverty, rural location, and adversity in interpersonal relationships make decisions and engage in agency through their narratives and everyday experiences. As a social scientific concept, the agency indicates the intentional behavior of individuals in the context of their environments, relations, and situations. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were collected with sixteen participants in rural south-central New York state who were living in extreme and/or chronic poverty. While exercising agency is viewed as important to the upward mobility of families and individuals in poverty, our participants encountered not only complex contexts for doing so but, at times, engaged in rebellious or counterproductive forms of agency. Furthermore, family ideology, such as traditional family values, shaped the perceived possibilities for forming one's life course. We find the structure-agency dichotomy less useful than a framework that incorporates additional sources of constraints on agency, such as embodiment and culture. We also encounter difficulty in applying the concept of agency to the experiences of our research participants in ways that point to the necessary reworking of the concept.

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engage in to cope with, and sometimes change, their realities.

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**A**gency, as a social scientific concept, references the intentional behavior of individuals in the context of their environments, relations, and situations. In this study, we examine how individuals who are constrained by extreme poverty, rural location, and adversity in interpersonal relationships make decisions and engage in agency through their personal narratives and everyday experiences. We draw on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals and couples in south-central New York. Many of the participants were identified as lacking skills in life management. Individuals and families were referred to the family planning program because agency workers identified them as in need of family planning-related education. Other participants encountered study advertisements in county mental health or social service offices. Examining the constraints on agency for those research participants not only furthers scholarly understanding of the challenges of poverty and interpersonal connections but also takes the discussion of human agency to a deeper level.

First, our study focuses on the importance of socio-historical context and social location for understanding individual lives. We thus identify four critical constraints on the agency for our research participants: embodiment, culturally informed identities and relations, structural positionings, and the agency itself. Geographical location, race, gender, mental health, and class shape how our research participants act and interpret their actions. Those dimensions of social relations limit the effectiveness of our participants' actions, but they also provide opportunities and options.

Mesmin Destin and Régine Debrosse (2017) described three components of status-based identity.

According to Destin and Debrosse (2017:100-101), these three components are "narrative identity," "social identity," and "future identity." Narrative identity allows people to have purpose—that is how people tell stories about their past and how their past has brought them to their present. Social identity encompasses people's perception of their place within the social strata and how they experience their resources compared to social others (Destin and Debrosse 2017:100). People's perception of their resources is influenced by their social comparisons. It could, for example, feel richer for a middle-class person to live in a poor neighborhood than for a rich person to live in a rich neighborhood. Future identity is what people believe their lives could be (Destin and Debrosse 2017:101). Status-based identity could harm the sense of self of an individual should their status-based identity be unfavorable for them.

Many of the participants in our study have mental illnesses. Poverty is prevalent among people with mental illnesses (Sylvestre et al. 2017). John Sylvestre and colleagues (2017) argue that community mental health programs focus on individual-level interventions that are not effective at addressing poverty among people with mental illnesses who are damaged by their many barriers to daily life. "It is a damaging, distressing, and needless part of daily life of many that stunts their recovery" (Sylvestre et al. 2017:153).

We found instances in which gender, socioeconomic status, and family structure have played a role in what we call rebellious agency. Rebellious agency occurs in circumstances when individuals take actions that they know are not socially acceptable and understand there could be negative consequences. Tony Brown (2003:296) pointed to nihilistic tendencies, where individuals in African American com-

munities experienced pervasive pessimism and fatalistic worldviews about their perceived inability to escape the constraints of stratification that bound them, manifesting as self-defeating behaviors. Rebellious agency, we suggest, is a way to engage in an agency at all when there are no pathways available for the types of agency that could build toward a brighter future. We view rebellious agency as an additional category for thinking through how people exercise agency.

Second, we encounter a seeming paradox in the use of the concept of agency. Examples of life course agency in the interviews are common, but they appear to have limited effect. Disadvantaged people in poverty, especially those who appear rather not adept at agency, may exercise agency in less visible ways than others. Finally, acts of rebellious agency, while allowing individuals to engage in agency, do not improve and may hinder their life course. For those reasons, we propose that agency has a “dark side” that should be further explored to better understand decision-making among persistently disadvantaged persons.

## Theoretical Framework

The concept of agency has been salient in life course and other sociological literature as a way to make sense of the interplay between constraints and decision-making and how it relates to socioeconomic mobility (Elder 1994; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Barnes 2008; Settersten 2015). The role of agency in the perpetuation of disadvantage throughout the life course is of major interest given concerns about increasing inequality (Dannefer and Huang 2017). Such discussions are often framed as a structure versus agency issue, such that structure is viewed as constraining the agency (Dannefer and Huang 2017). Most fun-

damentally, agency is a feature of human sentience that refers to the potential of, or actualization of, affecting the course of events in one’s life. External or internal factors can constrain the ability of someone to affect the course of events. Agency and constraint thus co-exist. Sandra Barnes’s (2008) study exemplifies the concept of agency within constraints, finding that even though a research participant was exercising agency regularly, the impact of that agency was limited by structural forces. It is thus not the agency as the capacity for people in poverty that is in question but the ability to exercise that agency and make something happen.

Steven Hitlin and Glen Elder (2007) identify four types of agency, which are used to unpack how individuals may be attempting to exert control over their lives—existential, pragmatic, identity, and life course agency. Existential agency, according to Hitlin and Elder (2007:177), involves one’s ability to orient oneself and make decisions about one’s life even when constrained. When we are confronted by new situations that cannot be accounted for by our routines, we make decisions in the moment, influenced by our biographies and personalities, thus exercising pragmatic agency (Hitlin and Elder 2007:177). Identity agency is the way individuals perform their roles in life; we routinely engage in activities and commitments that maintain a claimed identity. Finally, life course agency is described by Hitlin and Elder (2007:182) as having two components—engagement in actions that could have long-term consequences, and processes of self-reflection and a belief (or not) in the ability to achieve goals.

Agency is a complicated concept fraught with implications for our understanding of the human experience. Soran Reader (2007) suggests the emphasis on agency to the exclusion of our passivity—the

inevitability of our suffering, being acted upon, dependency as people—is deeply problematic, and those “other sides of agency” must be incorporated into our notion of personhood. Scott Landes and Richard Settersten (2019) argue that if the agency is a universal human attribute, it should be defined accordingly, not in exclusionary ways. For instance, Hitlin and Elder (2007:37) refer to “developmentally normal human beings” and “socially competent individuals” in their definitions of agency (Hitlin and Elder 2007:186). While Hitlin and Elder (2007) acknowledge that some individuals may have more agentic capacity than others, Scott Landes and Richard Settersten (2019) have pointed out that definitions that preclude those with cognitive disability, for instance, are deeply problematic if they limit personhood. Researchers must, therefore, acknowledge the complexity of agency, recognizing its applicability to all persons, including those of limited autonomy. Poverty researchers have argued for the importance of recognizing the agency of people in poverty to involve them in their solutions as equal partners. At the same time, scholars have warned against ideological uses of agency to justify reductions in social assistance and libertarian policies that deny the mutual accountability of individuals (Kohli 2019).

Thus, agency can be and is used in very different ways, with varying implications. One purpose is to recognize and incorporate the existential nature of humanity. It is also used to remind us that people have some power as individuals and should be treated as autonomous beings (Hitlin and Elder 2007). Finally, and most often, the agency points to the ability of individuals to respond in different ways to circumstances and events (Elder 1994). As Steven Hitlin and Hye Won Kwon (2016:433) state, “[u]ltimately, we suggest that agency has served as

a popular and useful theoretical construct due in part to its slippery nature...which allows it to serve as a placeholder for scholars interested in carving out room for individual volition within a range of social forces.”

Two problems are evident: 1) the understanding of agency as essential to personhood, such that those who seem to have limited autonomy may be viewed as lesser persons, and 2) the tendency to focus on the individual and view agency in contraindication to structure rather than as working hand-in-hand. We see a third problem—the mismatch between agency as experienced and empirically observed and common conceptualizations of agency.

As Hitlin and Kwon (2016) point out, the agency has not been studied in much cross-cultural life course research. Thus, the exercising of agency may not always manifest or appear how Western scholars expect. The variety of ways that agency is conceptualized creates some difficulty in pinning down the best ways to study it empirically. Thus, Hitlin and Kwon (2016:432) identify objective and subjective dimensions: “[s]ome people have more economic, social, or psychological resources for encountering life’s vicissitudes...A greater amount of empirical work expressly on agency highlights its ‘subjective’ aspects, people’s internal sense that they can influence their lives.” Steven Hitlin and Charisse Long (2009) point out that children in Western societies are often taught to view their subjective agency as more powerful than it is relative to their objective agency. And it is easier for well-meaning adults to try to influence the subjective agency of youth rather than the objective realities (Hitlin and Long 2009). Whether considered as a matter of having choices or as a matter of exerting self-efficacy, the agency is viewed as “selective” (Kohli 2019). Some

people have it, and some do not—or not as much. Though less explored, agency may even be situationally dependent. And importantly for our purposes, the agency is linked to notions of precarity, such that “poverty” or “oppression” are effectively defined as “the denial of agency” (Dannefer and Huang 2017). But, is agency just about the ability to exert control, or does it also encompass the ability to try to exert some control, even if that effort “fails?” Perhaps agency is being exercised even when it does not appear to be. Are there positive implications of individuals exercising agency as choice or self-efficacy if it brings forth negative repercussions? Does the exercise of the agency have costs? We return to these questions in our discussion of results.

### Poverty and Objective Agency

We can talk about agency in two ways—as objectively practiced, such that the individual took an action that made a difference in their life course, or as subjectively practiced, such that the individual feels that they have made a difference in their life course. Much literature is focused on the structural constraints on objectively practiced agency. However, Steven Hitlin and Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson (2015) argue that the framing of constraints as structural is limiting and calls for more precision. For instance, we ought to consider the effects of relationships and settings, as well as macrostructural contexts. Sometimes conceptualized as “linked lives,” relationships are an important feature of life course study. Glen Elder (1998:4) holds that “lives are lived interdependently, and socio-historical influences are through a network of shared relationships.” According to Richard Settersten (2015:222), relationships serve multiple functions in the life course, demanding alignment, judging of progress,

forming identity, motivating, and lending stability, disruption, protection, and risk. The agency is also experienced *with* other people in our lives. For example, orientations related to goals for the future and desires held by individuals are often formed in relation to or cooperation with other people—social service workers, romantic partners, parents, friends, and adversaries. The social networks of people in poverty demonstrably affect a variety of outcomes, from employment stability to child neglect (Newman 2000; Blank 2005; Klärner and Knabe 2019). Family and intimate relationships are thus central to efforts to exercise agency.

In addition, the body may be viewed as a constraint on agency, especially if viewed through a relational perspective that acknowledges how structural conditions and cultural meanings come to inhabit the body. That is another way in which the individual is always already a contextualized subject. As disability scholars elaborate, the ability of someone to *do something* is as much a feature of the environment in which they operate as it is of the body. Increasingly, sociologists incorporate the role of the body in their research questions. For instance, scholars are interested in how food insecurity affects mental health of mothers and subsequent outcomes for children (McLaughlin et al. 2012; Coleman-Jensen, Steffen, and Whitley 2017), how family planning for pregnant women profoundly affects infant mortality, level of poverty, educational attainment, health outcomes, and life outcomes (Allen 2007), and how stress, powerlessness, and social isolation impact the mental health of women in poverty (Goodman, Fells Smyth, and Banyard 2010).

But, structural factors do not disappear. In this study, rural poverty involves a set of constraints



that affect individuals' ability to direct their lives. Many rural areas lack employment opportunities; a wide range of adequate health, emergency, social, childcare, digital, and educational services; and the socially vital "third places" outside of work and home (Brown 2003; Thiede, Lichter, and Slack 2016; Rhubart, Kowalkowski, and Pillay 2023). Decent-wage employment and population size have both been on the decline in rural areas and small towns, contributing to a "brain drain" with little support or expectation for improved life prospects for the young people who remain (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Dobis et al. 2021). The south-central region of New York state where this study takes place (forming a major part of the "Catironadack" region) has experienced sustained population loss since the 1970s due to declines in fertility, deindustrialization-prompted outmigration, and declines in immigration (Thomas and Fulkerson 2023). A decline in farming, particularly dairy, combined with a rising tourist industry and ample rural amenities and recreation, has led to increased second-home ownership (primarily by downstate residents) and short-term rentals that have reduced the supply of affordable housing (Thomas and Fulkerson 2023). Employment prospects, meanwhile, have declined with the disappearance of traditional industries in textiles and leather and the departure of manufacturing employers. More recently, counties in the study area experienced declines between three and five percent in labor force participation between 2010 and 2015, although 2010 represents a slight uptick from 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau 2023). The bulk of employment transpires in retail, hospitality, local and state government (including education), and the healthcare sector (Fulkerson et al. 2023).

Social networks in rural areas are also thought to be less varied, characterized by stronger ties,

more personal interactions, and a greater burden for less reward compared to metropolitan areas (Klärner and Knabe 2019). While there can be positive results from repeated interactions with the same people, smaller social circles reduce privacy, and that can constrain action (e.g., Sherman 2006). Isolation is an issue due to transportation restrictions and spatial distancing from others. The rural context can be particularly problematic for those suffering from domestic violence as these same issues affect the options for escaping or hiding and for seeking assistance or protection from people who know the abuser. Social relationships in rural life can be more circumscribed even as they are more intense.

Thus, we rely on the important insight that all agentic action occurs in the context of and through social relationships, which may include relationships with social structures and institutions. Social structures and institutions constrain and enable agency. In addition, the agency is always dependent on interpersonal relationships. Our participants live in rural south-central New York, have impaired access to transportation, and do not interact very much outside family and a few service providers. The social relationships that our participants do have are, perhaps, even more influential than parallel social relationships may be for those not experiencing rural poverty. This paper's focus is on how some people in poverty describe their actions and how those descriptions connect to social relations, cultural expectations, and structural constraints. We find exercising of agency is conditioned by not only structural features but embodiment and cultural features. Agency frustrated by those various factors may be channeled into different, more problematic directions.

## Poverty and Subjective Agency

Valerie Maholmes (2014:23) writes, “[o]ptimism is related to self-efficacy in the sense that self-efficacy involves an individual’s belief in their own ability, whereas optimism involves expectations of good outcomes.” Optimism is, for Maholmes, protective and useful. Optimism helps individuals imagine a positive trajectory for themselves despite the many potential perceived difficulties on the horizon for them. Yet, Carol Graham (2017) asserts that sharp inequality exists in the US not only in terms of outcomes but also in people’s levels of hope and investment in the future. Graham examines how people in poverty—especially white folk in poverty in the past decade—show signs of hopelessness and desperation as they increasingly lack the buffers for stress found in social networks and the empowerment of education. Furthermore, people with difficult daily struggles have less resiliency to negative shocks and setbacks that then prevent them from making improvements to their lives (Graham 2017).

Optimistic thinking as a coping mechanism and method for people in poverty to improve their lives is, nonetheless, identified as effective—to an extent (Chen and Miller 2012; Maholmes 2014). Some working-class young adults in Jennifer Silva’s (2012) study engaged in narratives of survival and triumph in the face of adversity in circumstances when societally valued markers of adulthood were unavailable. In Sandra Barnes’ (2008) case study, her participant engaged in behaviors such as those described by Edith Chen and Gregory Miller (2012) to navigate the difficulties she and her family faced in their everyday lives. But, as Graham worries, what happens when those optimistic efforts do not yield fruit? Warren TenHouten (2023:92) suggests that hope can be “empty”; “[i]nsofar as the one holding such empty hope

remains unaware of, or ignores, obstacles and difficulties, and expends time and energy with no result, hope can become irrational and self-destructive.” Indeed, as we explore the role of optimism and hope, we find both benefits and hard limits.

## Methods

In-person semi-structured interviews were conducted from 2011 through 2013 as part of a program evaluation effort with a local family planning organization in south-central New York state. Out of 16 total participants, 10 were with clients of the organization, recruited through a Family Planning Education Services program. The program involved intensive or as-needed case work with individuals or couples who were referred and expressed interest in assistance with family planning broadly defined. Case notes were shared with the principal investigator (PI), who also shadowed the initial case worker on home visits to clients in 2011 and met with the replacement case worker several times. As the caseload for the program declined in 2012, the PI made efforts to recruit research participants of similar circumstances (from a low socioeconomic background with various personal challenges) by advertising through community agencies and snowball sampling. That effort yielded six more interview participants, including two interviews with couples, before funding and potential research participant interest trickled to a stop. This project (#2011-46) was approved by the requisite Institutional Review Board, and a Certificate of Confidentiality (CC-HD-11-111) was obtained from the US National Institutes of Health to further protect subjects’ confidentiality.

Our sample is not representative of poor or working-class individuals and couples in the area, and

our participants are predisposed to mental, physical, emotional, and other severe challenges that brought them to the attention of service providers or exposed them to study advertisements at the local mental health or social services agency. Interviews were typically conducted in the participant's home, as preferred by the participant. Their home life was often not very private and, in some cases, was not even a space designed for permanent habitation (e.g., a motel room or a jail). Interviews were conducted with couples as they expressed preference and as was often necessitated by circumstances. Other interviews were interrupted or overheard by family members and friends who stopped by or whom we could not ask to leave in the middle of winter, without transportation, and in small housing units where privacy was not an option. Interviewers tread cautiously in such cases, skipping questions about feelings about sexual intimacy, for instance.

Six of the 16 subjects participated in dyadic interviews. Although those interviews were conducted as dyads as a matter of necessity, other qualitative research has found that dyadic interviews provide unique advantages and insights. Dyadic interviews allow for the exploration of relationality and complex relationships (Hochman, Segev, and Levinger 2019; Topper and Bauermeister 2021), stimulation of deeper responses (Hochman et al. 2019; Morgan et al. 2013), and the revealing of convergence or divergence in couples' thoughts and experiences (Hiefner 2021). At the same time, we take into account how dyadic narratives likely reflect individual experiences and perspectives less than could fully private interviews. Interviews took place under varying circumstances as a result of the constraints of the research participants' living conditions. However, since we are not comparing interviews or seeking uniformity but examining them for general process-

es, such varying conditions inform as much as they limit the data obtained.

Questions on the interview schedule pertained to economic circumstances; family circumstances; goals and desires; personal challenges; past and current relationship experiences; ideal mothers and fathers; contraception and sexual behavior; and experiences with doctors, case workers, and other practitioners or service providers. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes to two hours. In the fall of 2012, we attempted to contact and arrange follow-up interviews. Many participants' phone numbers were changed or out of service, but we obtained three second-wave interviews with four participants, including one couple.

Study subjects range in age from 17 to about 50 years old. Four were 17 years of age, two of whom had children. An additional eight, including two men, were between 19 and 29. Three participants were in their 30s, one was about 45, and one (male) was about 50 years of age. All are white non-Hispanic and reside in cities or towns of populations less than 10,000—often less than 5,000. Three are men—all of whom interviewed as part of a couple—and the remaining 13 are women. All but one (woman, aged 17) identified as primarily heterosexual, which is not surprising for a family planning clientele recruited by referral. Most participants were unemployed at the time of the interview, although about three-quarters of the sample had held employment in the past. Educational attainment ranged from less than high school to a four-year college degree, although the most common response for those over 18 was a high school diploma or equivalent. The average number of biological children was just over one child per individual, although not all of their children were in the custody of their biological parents.



One couple had four children altogether, one participant had three children, four other participants had two children, one had one, and the remaining had none. Two mothers were pregnant at the time of the first interview.

Transcribed interviews were supplemented by field notes taken before and after the interviews and coded for themes and patterns. Central questions during open coding were: How do people reconcile goals and desires with barriers? What shapes expectations? How is the desire for autonomy and agency contingent upon relationships? What relationships matter and why? How do relationships affect goals/desires and meeting them? The authors took further steps to deepen and advance the analysis by creating analytical synopses and tables to draw connections between daily living conditions, relations, and the exercising of agency.

We primarily examine, therefore, how the participants talk about their experiences of and ideas about their life course trajectory. Guiding research questions during the final stages of analysis were: What kinds of relationships matter for autonomy and agency? What are participants' plans and expectations for their future, and how do such plans/expectations connect with major relationships, their past experiences, and objective conditions? When plans are derailed or expectations are thwarted, how do people react?

The methods for data analysis for our study were inductive. We coded our data for themes that were most important to the participants. As themes emerged, we created additional codes for those themes. A benefit of inductive research, according to Theophilus (2018), is that it allows the researchers to get a comprehensive understanding of the data. It

highlights the themes that are most important to the research participants.

## Findings

The participants in our study are unable to achieve many markers associated with achievement and maturity in American society such as home ownership, educational degrees, financial independence, and marriage. Many of the concrete desires the participants express for their futures center on family. Nonetheless, their lives often do not improve or change in ways they expect. Most participants exhibit forms of agency and show positive signs of resiliency and optimism. However, in some cases, their situation worsens with expressions of agency. We find four categories of constraints on agency and frame the results accordingly: the body, though always in relation to others and institutions; culture in the form of identities, values, and relations; structural positionings, especially in reference to institutions and opportunities; and agency itself, in the sense that the very need to exercise agency even under frustrated conditions can lead to acts that hinder future autonomy, but that still very much count as agency.

### The Body in Relation

Poverty takes a toll on the body in ways that can hinder agency. All individuals are embodied and thus constrained by physiological realities, but physicality is an ability or disability in relation to the environment being navigated. Poverty directly affects both the physical experience and the context one must navigate. In this section, we discuss two main ways that the body in relation to others can inhibit agency. While not exhaustively, we focus on two specific processes: how being deprived of control over one's body inhibits agency and how health

issues can interfere with meeting social expectations, especially in terms of productivity and social markers of success.

Trauma and mental conditions play a role in life course agency. Many participants in our study reported very traumatic lives. Our sample also had victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Domestic violence is a trauma that (both directly experienced and witnessed), according to Carrie Moylan and colleagues (2010), early exposure could increase the chances for an individual to have behavior problems. Nina Papalia, Emily Mahnn, and James Ogloff (2021:74) pointed out that half of child sexual abuse victims are victims of sexual abuse as adults. Having psychiatric disorders related to early sexual abuse, such as PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), is associated with an increased vulnerability to additional sexual abuse in later life (Papalia 2021:83). One research participant, Opal, was molested by her father and had a history of abuse from men. She told the interviewer that it was after she reported her father that she began to engage in self-harm. She said that reporting her father harmed her relationship with her mother: "After I turned in my father and everything basically in my life fell apart after that point, my mother was no longer there for me, and I had been very close with my mother." Opal presents herself as a generally caring person who does fine in friend relationships but cannot do intimate or parent-child relationships. She does not have custody or formal visitation rights with her children but can see them whenever she wants. She told her interviewer that she feels "horrible" about not being a "better" mother but is comforted by the notion that at least she made sure they were safe—by not being their main caretaker. She indicated being pressured into having children; it took her a long time to convince doctors to permit a tubal procedure. That lack of con-

trol over her body does not seem to have helped her agency. Opal divulged that she became abusive once she started dating people and has walked away from "very good men" as a result.

Wendy, aged 17 at first interview, was sexually assaulted at an early age and experienced extensive problems with physical and mental health. At interview one, Wendy wanted to get her GED (General Educational Development) and go to community college for two years, then a four-year program, and then a Master's in Social Work. She also hoped to get a driver's license and establish independence from her parents. However, in interview two, she had made no headway toward those goals. Physical and mental health issues reinforced instability and limited ability to follow through. Wendy found out she had endometriosis, a painful condition, in addition to ovarian cysts that made it hard for her to walk or be generally active. Those conditions worsened Wendy's difficulty pursuing her goals. As a result, she dropped out of high school and then dropped out of the CDO Workforce. She did not feel she had made the steps toward adulthood that she should—having a GED, a license and a car, and a job or school career. Wendy's relationships with others were also fraught. She bounced around from place to place in living arrangements. Wendy told us she had difficulty getting along with people, including her mother, the partners of her parents, teachers, relatives, and her partner's family. Yet, she believed that she was a "good friend." She asserted her value multiple times, despite telling us that she felt devalued by others. Wendy reported taking care of herself, obtaining methods of contraception (and hiding it from her parents). She seemed to distrust authority figures in general. She was skeptical of her teachers and their knowledge, distrustful in her relationships with older men,

distrustful of her doctors, whom she feared could impart information to her parents, and most distrustful of her parents.

Prior research already suggests that the rural ecological context affects health through limited access to healthcare facilities and professionals, inadequate social capital, higher rates of food insecurity, and greater job insecurity (Scott and Wilson 2011; Coleman-Jensen et al. 2017). Many rural job opportunities, like certified nursing assistant and the extractive industries, involve regular physical labor that can lead to chronic medical problems while also excluding those who already have physical health issues. Opal, who was in her forties, said that she had to learn to “just deal with” degenerative disc disease. She still wanted to work at an adult home, as she loved doing before her work injury “took over” her back. A certified nursing assistant position is, however, no longer a realistic option for Opal.

Those cases demonstrate the relevance of the agency of the physical body and social relations in tandem. Histories of abuse and mental illness complicate the ability of individuals to make the choices they would like to make, and those histories operate not just through relations but through the body as well. Adequate health care depends not only on location and availability but also on the relationships that are formed between people. The distrust that reigns among many people in poverty (see: Levine 2013) undermines their ability to take care of themselves, address health problems, and conform to social expectations.

### **Culture and Identity Relations**

Culture comprises the many social influences that provide meaning. Meaning involves interpretation,

a sense of purpose, and the relative value of anything. Identity, then, is strongly linked to culture, as are those relations that individuals rely on to affirm their identity. Research participants sometimes described taking actions or holding preferences that accorded with identity agency, agentic action used to perform roles to align with societal norms and values (Hitlin and Elder 2007). For instance, some participants situated themselves in reference to “traditional values.” When asked about their goals and where they see themselves in the future, many participants discussed marriage and other markers of the “standard North American family,” including educational attainment, formal work, home ownership, and having children (Nelson 2006; Settersten 2015). Such markers, particularly marriage and child-rearing, feature as goals that participants view as realistic, even though they remained difficult to obtain in some cases. Nonetheless, those cultural meanings and values are readily available. In cases like Opal’s or Wendy’s, participants reject such values, but ascertaining whether that is a pragmatic response or the cause of their situation demonstrates how difficult it can be to parse out uninhibited agency.

The “family devotion schema,” according to Mary Blair-Loy (2003:2), “promises women meaning, creativity, intimacy, and financial stability in caring for a husband and children.” The “family devotion schema” is a cultural model that “defines marriage and motherhood as a woman’s primary vocation” (Blair-Loy 2003:2). Marriage is not available to many low-income women, but it is still something participants in our study hope for. Katie McLanahan (2004:612) pointed out that assortative mating is an important factor in understanding low-income women’s difficulty in the marriage market. College-educated women are more likely to marry and

less likely to divorce; they are more likely to marry college-educated men, who are also more likely to marry and less likely to divorce. Divorce rates are rising among non-college-educated women and are becoming lower among college-educated women. According to Pamela Smock, Wendy Manning, and Meredith Porter (2005), cohabiting couples base their decisions about whether to marry on how much income they have. Many cohabiting couples, according to Smock and colleagues (2005), see marriage as a destination to be arrived at after having completed other milestones, which are seen as prerequisites, such as college education, employment, financial stability, and home ownership. Marriage is seen as a privilege for low-income women and has a symbolic meaning of having “made it” in society (Cherlin 2004; Edin and Kefalas 2011). Cohabiting and non-marital relationships are more vulnerable to dissolution, but because low-income women with children often distrust men and find peace in their roles as mothers, they both hold hope for families that are “whole” and remain protective over their children from the pain caused by men who have left them (Edin and Kefalas 2011).

Participants described having a desire to marry and keep their intimate relationships intact even when they described those relationships as abusive or otherwise undesirable. The symbolic importance of marriage and family looms large. Sheryl, incarcerated at the time of the interview, hoped to get back together with her ex-husband after release from jail despite describing the relationship as abusive and controlling. Sheryl claimed a lot of responsibility and guilt for things she perceived to have gone wrong in the marriage. Even though both Sheryl and her ex-husband cheated on each other, she believed that if she had not made him jealous in the first place, their marriage “would have been fine.”

A participant we call Clare described hoping to get married before giving birth to her baby but feeling it out of her grasp: “Personally, I would like to be married before my second one comes, but that’s not gonna happen.” When asked about barriers to getting married and meeting her goals, Clare said, “Right now, where I live, we don’t have transportation... There isn’t reliable childcare...we can’t afford it.” For Clare, living in a rural area without transportation and her financial instability make marriage and the stability she associated with marriage unattainable. As Smock and colleagues (2005) found, cohabitators often believe something should change in a relationship before getting married with a marker such as home ownership. For many of our participants, marriage feels unattainable because they are unable to afford a wedding, do not own a house, or lack a good job. Complicating matters, many of them also believe it is wrong to have children before marriage, like Clare, who wanted to be married to the father of the child before her new child was born.

Romantic relationships were, nonetheless, viewed with great optimism by many participants. They spoke extensively about valuing their romantic partners and wanting to be good partners. Those who did not describe romantic relationships or marriage as a desire described how trauma from past abuse caused them to avoid relationships, but still placed high value on them. For example, Opal said her aversion to having children, sexual relationships with men, and having a family is an effect of her history of molestation by her father, the man she said she should have been able to trust the most. Marsha, on the other hand, was another survivor of sexual abuse but had a much more optimistic view of men despite having an ex-boyfriend she described as “mean,” saying: “My boyfriend I’m with treats me really good...He’s excited that we’re expecting

a baby on the way...No one has made me feel like my heart was nothing but a piece of ice cream cone that just melts in his hands." Marsha described her new relationship as full of love and affection, a major improvement over previous experience.

Many of the participants greatly valued children and identified as good parents. Most either had children in the past or wanted to have children in the future. For instance, Marsha was pregnant during the interview. She let us know that she "really wants to be a mother" and she knows that Child Protective Services (CPS) will try to take her next child away because of her disability. She went into detail about how she believed she was a good mother:

Let me tell you about when I had my twins with me. The father left the kids in wet, damp clothes, which is a no-no...Their clothes were damp. I've changed their clothes...Cleaned onesies...cleaned, dried pants, every day...That's one example right there. Of a good mother.

Although Marsha's children had been taken away by CPS, she expressed belief that she would get them back. She talked about praying for her first son to be a healthy baby and how her prayers were answered: "my first son was a miracle. Doctors had told me I was not able to carry a baby to term...I prayed every night to have a healthy baby." Her repeatedly expressed faith in God and prayers bolstered her credentials as a good mother in her eyes.

Traditional values serve to reaffirm worth by aligning oneself with a generally recognized and understood set of values in a context of uncertainty. Many women in our study aligned themselves with traditional values and identities affiliated with ideal womanhood and motherhood. The men in our

study aligned themselves with traditional values and identities affiliated with ideal masculinity and fatherhood. Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas (2011) pointed out that pregnancy brings transformation to a woman's life and changes the way a woman is treated, often in a more profound way than it does for men. Participants in our study, such as Marsha and Valery, told us during the interviews that pregnancy was the most important time they had with their children. For Marsha, this was because she lost custody of her children, and having that precious memory of carrying her babies gave her peace. She was proud of how she went to her doctor's appointments and ate a diet that was healthy for her pregnancies. She told us that it was the best thing she ever did in her life. That was her reflection after her children had been taken away. For Valery, the pregnancy was what she said finally got her to stop using drugs. Participants often expressed feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness when discussing goals and current barriers. Aligning oneself with traditional values seemed to provide some sense of importance, success, and reward. Arguably, egalitarian values are not socially supported for people living in rural areas and poverty. In many cases, study participants were very contained within a small network. Thus, religiosity or family values provided validation for these rural, white participants, but they can also operate as major constraints. The rural context of circumscribed networks is such that family as an institution can exercise immense influence, especially over the relatively powerless.

Valerie described herself as "old-fashioned" in explaining what she believed mothers' and fathers' roles should be.

[For young parents], their best option is, they need a father there...especially boys...need someone that's



a role model to them...you should be out there busting your butt off...I'm kind of more old-fashioned. I think that the mother should stay home with the children. Get an education, but if they want to be a stay-at-home mom, be allowed that opportunity, and the man should be working as many hours as he can...and the mother should be taking care of the house...the children, and making sure that her man is taken care of also.

Like Valerie, Sheryl voiced a need for fathers to be a role model to their children. Sheryl also believed in a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century version division of labor for men and women. When asked about relationships, she said that a husband should be “decent” and that a wife should “take care of her husband and have dinner ready when he gets home from work.”

Research participants did not always or immediately revert to traditional values narratives. For instance, Marsha does not invoke a traditional values explanation for her belief that fathers should pay child support—rather, it is a matter of fairness and responsibility. Yet, some clearly yearned for some sort of sense of security, normalcy, or a sense of worth. As Sarah indicated in discussing her desire for a real home for her and her new husband:

Like it'll be like some place we are happy—like not even happy, like content, and somewhere I'll feel safe, and then we can start like just growing and working like to be better people and like productive people and just not having everything in the way like stupid things stopping us from functioning like people where it's not a huge deal to go to the laundry room or something.

Not all research participants try to fulfill that yearning through religion or traditional values, though

they are clearly important to some. While traditional values may be an attractive rhetoric for many of the rural poor, it is not hegemonic.

Finally, evidence points to how relationships directly affect the agency. Nuclear family ties were not the only social bonds with such an effect. Valerie, a teenage mother, placed a high value on relationships with healthcare providers and social workers. Valerie experienced doctors calling child protective services on her and was told by health professionals that she was a “bad mother” for having a baby as a teenager. Valerie wished people understood that she is a “good mother”—she keeps her son clean, takes care of him, and loves him. Valerie had a lot of positive things to say about a doctor who “treated her well” and made her feel better about herself and her pregnancy: “My doctor told me that if I didn't have my son, I wouldn't have made it this far... You can judge me all you want for having a teen pregnancy; in reality, when he was born, he saved my life.” Despite many turbulent relationships and negative experiences with healthcare providers, one doctor's attitude provided a different perspective on herself as a person and mother. Such relations can inhibit or support the exercising of agency.

Valerie and other participants in similar circumstances engage in identity agency by trying to work toward achieving markers of legitimacy, such as marriage and a standard nuclear family. Traditional values identity agency is accessible in terms of exposure to cultural norms and ideals, but such ideals are difficult to live up to in practice. Andrew Cherlin (2004) argues that marriage has become deinstitutionalized and more about the symbolic value and the display of success and legitimacy than the compelling necessity it was in the past. Yet, marriage remains “a much sought-after but elusive

goal” (Cherlin 2004:855). Those in the lower strata of society often express a strong desire to marry but wait to do so because they want to do it “right” (Cherlin 2004:857). Traditional values identity agency involves efforts to convince oneself and others of one’s legitimacy and worth as a human being, even when faced with routine barriers to success. Having children is one such marker, but one that would provide more status and legitimacy if occurring within a marriage.

### Structure

Structure refers to the set of constraints and enabling conditions that people face, including conditions that exist outside of the expectations of person-to-person interaction. That involves the social organization of resources, including employment opportunities, job conditions, policies, and other forms of material resource dissemination. Interviewers prompted participants to think about their life goals and trajectories concerning education, employment, family, and relationships. Participants did engage in that process of goal orientation in a variety of ways, prompted and unprompted. Though not mutually exclusive, discussions of life plans and histories often led participants to orient themselves either in reference to optimism and resilience or frustration and discouragement.

Many participants had optimistic narratives about their place within the social order, even when they referenced difficult circumstances and “unmovable boulders” in the way of their hopes and dreams. Some participants, however, expressed frustration and little hope for making improvements in their lives. Individuals with less optimism often referenced an external locus of control—they said things in their interviews about external forces (luck, fate,

structural forces, higher powers) deciding what lay ahead for them in the future. Conversely, the more optimistic participants described how they would meet their goals and have success in the domains of romantic relationships, such as “starting over” with new family units and improving career options. Examples of how participants made sense of their ability to attain those goals include faith (usually religious), belief in their capabilities, and through their narratives of optimism and beating the odds. Structural constraints remain particularly brutal facts of life, frequently limiting the effects of agency as described in these narratives. The frustration related to low wages when employed, the lack of reliable transportation and childcare, and inadequate access to educational opportunities were palpable across interviews. The rural economic context certainly plays a role here—few decent-paying jobs, isolation, and poorly-resourced schools limit options.

Like Sheryl, many participants in our study discussed a desire to reassemble their family unit. For many of them, that meant getting their children back from foster care or family members, and for others, it meant moving closer to family members who lived distantly. Many of our participants experienced their children being taken away, the threat of more children being taken away, separation from extended family members of value to them, and general isolation, all related to financial constraints. One couple, Brian and Denise, described getting their children back as a major objective. Brian said, “Right now, I’m looking to upgrade to a different job...a bigger house and get the children back. Just work towards getting the things we need. Getting the car fixed. And moving forward as a family.” To Brian, moving forward as a family needs to happen after he has reassembled his family by getting his children back.

Brian presented a more optimistic orientation than his partner, Denise. He said he was sure that he would get his children back, and he had friends who would give him a house. There is also optimism, if not always clear signs of agency, as regards employment. During Brian's first-wave interview, he seemed happy about his job, but by his second-wave interview a year later, he said he wanted a better job. When we asked Brian what kind of job he wanted, he described something with computers or related to video game creation. Brian is constrained by his geographical location. He lives in rural central New York, and although he has some education beyond high school, he must work within walking distance. He said a Dairy Queen opened down the road, and they would hire him. That was the only workplace he could walk to, but he had not talked to them at the time of the interview, nor did he know if they were hiring. Although Brian's agency is constrained by many barriers, he remains optimistic in his framing of the future. Though for some scholars, optimism is a form of agency (Snyder 2000), others question the assumption that agency is necessarily involved or effective (Miceli and Castelfranchi 2015). Brian's optimism seems useful for motivating him, but we observe that his optimism has at times also failed against the hard limits of reality. Furthermore, it is unclear to what degree such displays of optimism might be the result of complex interactional factors, such as a socioeconomically disadvantaged man's showing of bravado in interaction with a woman college student or professor.

Many participants in this study have goals that will be difficult to achieve given their circumstances. Some realize it, whereas others do not acknowledge that in the interview. Valerie said she planned to go for multiple programs at college after graduating high school.

I'm gonna be finishing high school and then I'm enrolling to college to go for RN and ultrasound technician. If I graduate in time...But, right now, I dropped out of my classes for a few months because he—their father—just started working... But...I'm hoping.

For Valerie, waiting for the father of her children to obtain stability is the barrier to her ability to be upwardly mobile. Valerie expresses hope, but that might also be an expression of uncertainty.

Other participants described desires to be upwardly mobile through education and employment. Some participants were taking steps toward a GED and applying to college, while others described education attainment as far in the future. Clare, who was pregnant at the time, described having a desire to get a GED and get married before her second baby was born. "I'd like to go to school. First, I have to get my GED. And probably do something with, like, child development... having my own, I just want to know so much and learn so much more." Like Clare, Debbie described having a desire to go to school to study something she is passionate about, get married, reestablish a family unit, and be upwardly mobile. However, frustration often results as marriage and upward mobility feel out of reach. Denise, for instance, explained that her case worker would ask her to come up with a goal, such as getting a car. She finally got the car, and "the sun was shining" on her that day. Then, it stopped working almost right away. Denise described battling hopelessness and feeling like she was losing; nothing is ever enough. Denise's case suggests that people may be less motivated to exercise life course agency if their actions do not seem to matter.

## Agency

Some individuals in our sample recounted engaging in what we term rebellious agency. Those are actions or attitudes taken by the subject in which they rebel against socially conventional ideas about what is good for them. We did not come across any such discussion of rebellious agency in our review of the literature but found it a necessary concept for interpreting the data. We propose that such a form of agency often happens out of frustration, desperation, resignation, and sometimes when other forms of agency have failed. In some circumstances, rebellious agency can feel empowering. Placed into the context of the life course/agency conceptual framework, the exercising of rebellious agency is an example of how individuals sometimes work against their long-term interests by asserting their dignity or expressing frustration. In doing so, subjects assert themselves, and, in effect, exercise agency for the very purpose of exercising agency. Those include specific actions in which the individual is trying to assert some control but is doing so in ways that do not even necessarily gain the approval of peers or any other key referent group. Such actions occur out of desperation or lack of control in the immediate context. And they often have immediate negative consequences. That notion of rebellion also highlights the double nature of agency as entailing both positive and negative outcomes and possibly having value simply in being exercised—somewhat but not wholly apart from the outcome or intention.

Participants can also exercise rebellious agency in ways counter to the purpose of the program or research project. For instance, Anna refused to give opinions on several issues, including what she looks for in a relationship, which could be inter-

preted to mean her life and goals are still an open matter. In answer to our question about family-related goals, she replied that she was “too young” to have children and dismissed the question. However, Anna’s refusal to be pinned down in questions about her goals and expectations could be interpreted as a form of rebellious agency in that she is not allowing her life to be dictated—even by herself—just yet. That could be a lack of desire to exercise agency. Here, the paradoxical nature of the concept of agency emerges; perhaps there is an anti-agency agency. Perhaps the refusal to take action is a type of action that should be incorporated into the concept of agency. After all, using the concept of agency as a way of analyzing the data enables a more agentic reading of our research participants. Anna, for instance, did express some desires—she said she likes shopping, wants to get her own place rather than live with her mother “forever,” and does not want her partner to be “mean.” Perhaps her visions for the future are undeveloped, but her refusal to even make something up could be indicative of a sort of rebellion in the context of the interview.

When asked about her educational background, Belinda said, “well, I kinda sorta did something really bad. Last six months before I graduated high school, I did this. I broke the teacher’s nose because she called me a certain little unmentionable name that sorta got me.” Belinda has trouble expressing anger in healthy ways, although she uses wry, black humor to discuss her problems. She reported episodes of blacking out and lashing out (typically hurting only herself). Maybe she does not feel like she has a right to be angry or has internalized the patriarchal prohibition on anger displayed by women. She, too, indicated that she was molested by her father. We suggest that Belinda engaged in rebellious agen-

cy—hitting a teacher had negative consequences, but it made her feel empowered when she did it. Given Belinda’s general self-effacing and shy manner, the retributive violence and episodic lashing out may constitute a form of agency that is, under the circumstances, necessary or therapeutic.

At one point in the interview, Opal pointed out that her parents (including her abusive father) were taking care of her oldest son. She said she would not let her father know her daughters but also pointed out that she is not afraid of him molesting her son (who is 11) because he is “terrified of gay men.” Opal was victimized by a person who has control over her child. It is not surprising that Opal exhibited a lack of self-efficacy. As other researchers have suggested (Erdmans and Black 2008), many people in poverty must live with or continue to interact with people who have hurt them. Scholars who have studied the effects of childhood exposure to domestic violence and sexual assault (Moylan et al. 2010; Papalia 2021) have found that early exposure to adverse conditions in childhood, such as domestic violence and sexual assault, leads to an increased vulnerability to re-victimization. Opal said in her interview that she does not like men and experiences PTSD, which is, according to Papalia and colleagues (2021:74), associated with an increased vulnerability to additional sexual abuse later in life. That could be related to Opal’s description of having bad experiences with men. She said there is only one man she lets near her, and he is a “friend” who “could not touch her.” Those factors likely have a profoundly negative effect on agency and the ability to have healthy, fulfilling relationships later in life. She did set sexual boundaries with her friend by telling him he “could not touch her” and decided her daughters could not meet her father. A need to engage in self-defense is certainly conducive to rebellious agency.

Rebellious agency provides a clear demonstration of how agency derives directly from social relationships. Having significantly less control—especially over one’s life—promotes the exercising of agency *in any way one can*, including actions that may be hurtful to oneself or others. In other cases, the exercising of the agency is in contradiction to authority or others who question the value or worth of participants like Belinda and Wendy. However, for the most part, rebellious agency is a resource for those without more effective coping strategies. It is well-known that even self-harm is a form of coping. Our results confirm others in suggesting the importance of emphasizing effective and helpful coping mechanisms for victims of abuse and degradation.

## Discussion

### Limitations of the Study

The data are restricted primarily to interviews; we do not have extensive observations of the participants. The second-wave interviews provide data from multiple time points, but only four of the 16 participants were interviewed a second time. As a non-representative sample, this study cannot indicate the general characteristics of the rural poor in New York state; rather, results reveal processes as opposed to descriptions of a population.

### Understanding Poverty: Going Beyond Structure vs. Agency

According to Scott Landes and Richard Settersten (2019:2), “agency cannot come into being outside of an individual’s preceding or current relationships, and that agency is conceived, nourished and continually sustained or not by interpersonal relationships.” Relationships with other people were



perceived as both harmful and helpful by our participants in terms of conceptions of desires, optimism, goal setting, goal-reaching, having hope, and losing hope. Life course agency, or the act of making improvements to one's life, was often initiated in the context of relationships with other people, such as family members and romantic partners, social workers, and health care providers. For example, Anna and Wendy said they both wanted to leave home so they could get away from their parents and live independently. Two couples in our study described actions they were taking to improve their lives, identifying their "future together" as the motivation. Valerie said that she was bothered by having several different healthcare providers or different social workers. She said that it was important for her to have exposure to the same person every time so that it could be a "we" relationship with her doctors and service providers. Thus, people in poverty may place high importance on their relationships with doctors, social workers, family planning educators, and anyone they interact with within the service industry. Because many people experiencing poverty in rural areas may not always have much contact with other people outside their immediate circle, such micro-interactions with human services personnel can significantly impact their self-concept.

The rural setting of this study is an important factor. We believe geography is key to interpreting life course agency. We found instances where religiosity or family values provided validation, but they can also operate as major constraints. The rural context of circumscribed networks is such that the family as an institution can exercise immense influence, especially over the powerless. And to the extent that there is a rural "brain drain," those left behind are even more isolated from the sort of social capital that would empower them (Carr and Kefalas 2009;

Klärner and Knabe 2019). And what moral capital can the rural poor access (Sherman 2006)? While the specific cultural conditions no doubt vary across place and time, "family values" have long operated as a form of moral capital in rural settings. Benefits to living in a rural area may in fact exist as well, such as closer interpersonal relationships than their cosmopolitan counterparts, but that often carries the caveat of having less privacy (Sherman 2006). Nonetheless, many participants described constraints related to place when discussing barriers and problems, including employment opportunities, quality of education, transportation, and services.

Gender also played a clear role in how much control participants felt they had in their lives and in the implications traditional values held for family roles and notions of responsibility. Thus, some women in the study embraced the roles of mother and wife as desirable and important, and that conferred both burden and meaning. Denise, for instance, went without medication for her intense back pain to take care of the children. Sheryl planned to stay in and improve a high-conflict marriage for "the sake of the family." The abuse that female participants were frequently subjected to as women impacted their ability to exercise agency as confident and free persons. Overall, the difficulty and hazards of meeting the standards of American mothers and wives illustrate how aligning themselves with such values can backfire.

Race was not referenced in the interviews. Yet, whiteness is a taken-for-granted status that can be difficult to interrogate precisely because it may go unmentioned. We cannot ascertain whether any of the participants felt racial threat, identified with white supremacy specifically in any way, or felt affiliation with or distance from people of color. Rough-

ly 95% of the 2010 and 2015 populations of the study area identified as white and non-Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau 2023), all of the research subjects appeared or identified as white, and none identified race as being salient in their lives. Although “family values” have sometimes operated as code for white culture (Løvdaal Stephens 2019), the harkening to traditional values did not seem to come from a place of political or racist intent for study participants; rather, it was viewed as a way to improve their lives in meaningful ways. However, further research on the racial and political views of the chronically poor is needed.

Although culture does matter for the experiences of people in poverty, that does not indicate a coherent or generalizable “culture of poverty” (Seale 2023). Even among those research participants, we observed much variation in adaptations and survival strategies. Nonetheless, structural conditions are not the only barriers to the agency. As Pierre Bourdieu (1977) represented with his notion of *habitus*, adaptations to life experiences develop into cognitive, affective, and physical ways of being in the world that permit or limit possibilities for action before opportunities even come into the picture. Cultural resources, available sources of worth, and physiological limitations play important roles in the exercise of agency.

### **The Concept of Agency: Incorporating the Dark Side**

For people in poverty, agency is often interpreted as those actions and decisions that help the individual or household to escape poverty. Because of that, life course agency tends to be of most interest to researchers over other categories of agency. People in poverty exercise agency but also face difficult

situations with higher costs for certain actions, such as more negative penalties. We argue that there is a dark side to agency. The exercising of agency is a requisite for personhood. Our findings in the context of the literature on agency, however, raise certain questions. How do we study “agency” for those people whose lives are defined by its denial? How can we presuppose it when optimism, self-efficacy, and/or subjective agency are discussed while recognizing the lack of objective agency as a fundamental part of the nature of disadvantage? If we consider subjective agency (having a sense of or belief that one has control over one’s life) as important, then we must consider the actions that represent a desire for that control, even in situations where individuals are being denied it objectively. In much literature, the idea seems to be that objective constraints lead to a lack of subjective agency, which leads to a failure to exercise agency. Yet, there are efforts to exert some level of control nonetheless. In some cases, we might even view passivity as an effort to control *something*.

By studying people whose agency is severely but not wholly constrained, we gain insight into the human capacity to exert control over one’s life. For instance, people in poverty or under severe constraints find ways to exercise agency, even if it is to their own or others’ detriment. Although rebellious agency may be detrimental to people and others around them, that rebellious use of agency may be phenomenologically important to their sense of self, will to live, and basic dignity. That rebellious use of agency can be costly, both for people in poverty and for well-intentioned authorities who are trying to make improvements to the lives of the poor. Although consequences of rebellious agency can lead to negative outcomes, such as losing custody of one’s children, it also has been characterized as therapeutic for

some of our participants when no other alternative seemed accessible to them at the moment or in the long term. Yet, those research participants would benefit in a more enduring way from changes in their circumstances and social realities. Improving circumstances for people experiencing rural poverty takes much more than an enhancement of subjective agency.

The notion of traditional values and the high value placed on family can also be seen as efforts to exercise agency, despite sometimes limiting the options of individuals. Hence our reference to the “dark” side of agency. Given the cultural toolkits available to people (Swidler 1986) and their social realities, efforts to empower or confer value on oneself can be simultaneously beneficial and self-defeating. There are even times when passivity might pay better dividends. On the other hand, individuals need to recognize the consequences of their actions for others. The relinquishing of agency can impair our ability to learn from mistakes. People have no choice but to exercise agency in some form or another; the question is what will result from the forms of agency our circumstances permit. It is worth remembering as we extol the virtues of agency, optimism, and empowerment in research on poverty and addressing poverty that, in practice and theory, exercising agency is not an unalloyed good. When the exercising of agency fails, whether life course, identity-related, or rebellious, it may incur psychological and material costs.

## Conclusions

The central problem addressed in this article is that people in poverty are often unable to make what they would like to happen. Consequently, they require some other source of meaning and a sense

of worth. Small acts of agency or perception of personal agency are critical, even if ineffective in changing one’s circumstances—posing a quandary for researchers. While we have found those interviews instructive for understanding issues of agency for people in poverty, much work remains to be done.

If the concept of agency is to be used to understand life course poverty, we should embrace its complexity and paradoxes. Otherwise, we risk belittling or misunderstanding the socially disadvantaged. The exercise of agency may sometimes take the form of anti-agency; that is, rejecting control or the illusion thereof over one’s life or rebelliously wrecking one’s chances because that is the only way to have an impact. At the same time, the broader social science literature needs to continue beyond the framework of structure versus agency. Other social processes beyond structure play a role in conditioning acts of agency, including cultural processes, relationships, and embodiment. Future research is needed to explore how such processes unfold for people under severe economic and cultural constraints. Specifically, social network analysis combined with in-depth explorations of agency for people living in distressed rural areas would help answer some of those remaining questions.

## Acknowledgments

This research was funded by SUNY Oneonta through a 2012-2013 Faculty/Professional Staff Vibrant Community Grant Program (grant number 1096641-58288). The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of SUNY Oneonta (project numbers 2011-46 Sep. 20, 2011 and 2012-82 Nov. 8, 2012) for studies involving humans.

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## Citation

Obernesser, Laura and Elizabeth Seale. 2024. "The Dark Side of Agency: A Life Course Exploration of Agency among White, Rural, and Impoverished Residents of New York State." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 20(2):46-69. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.20.2.03>