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## Doing Poor in AmeriCorps: How National Service Members Deal With Living Below the Poverty Line

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.11.4.06>

**Abstract** Many young AmeriCorps members enter a post-college lifestyle of food stamps, social services, and living below the poverty line. Using Simmel's (1965) concept of poverty as a social category one is put into, and West and Fenstermaker's (1995) concept of class as something one "does," this paper looks at the AmeriCorps program, to examine how members "do poor." In 22 in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of AmeriCorps members, I detail a member's "typical" experience with poverty: first, encountering themselves in poverty, then working to disassociate themselves from having a "poor" identity, and, finally, still maintaining the positive experiences associated with their service.

**Keywords** AmeriCorps; Poverty; Qualitative Methods; Identity Work; Social Class

Being "poor" is simultaneously a governmental label, a possible self-identification, and a deeply stigmatized trait. Whatever the concept means to an individual, the stigma that comes along with the label most likely means individuals would prefer not to see themselves in such a light. With this understanding, the question is raised: How do in-

dividuals who are labeled "poor" by governmental institutions self-identify, especially for individuals not previously so labeled? Specifically, while individuals "are" in poverty, how are they "doing poor"? The AmeriCorps program is an under-researched and illuminating organization to study this concept.

Established in 1994, AmeriCorps was originally touted as President Clinton's domestic Peace Corps (Segal 1994), and annually retains 75,000 members to engage in nationwide community service. The AmeriCorps program provides a living stipend and education award for its members (AmeriCorps 2012a), but the stipend members receive is low enough to put them below the poverty line, making members eligible for social services like food stamps.

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For many AmeriCorps members, this marks their first time living with such little money, away from college, and working to forge a life for themselves. So, what happens when working for the betterment of impoverished populations makes you, technically, poor?

What is the "typical" experience of an AmeriCorps member earning low wages, and how do such members relate to the people that they serve, who are often recipients of those same social services? In twenty-two interviews with a diverse sample of AmeriCorps members, I ask the following: Do members think of themselves as "poor" people? If not, how do they separate themselves from that identity? Lastly, how does the way members interpret their own poverty affect the way they think about the population they serve?

### Defining Poverty

To begin, it is necessary to define poverty sociologically. Poverty is measured quantitatively in a number of ways, by using income, wealth, or proportion of one's funds going to life necessities. Scholars argue over the best measurement practices, for example, the relative importance of early childhood poverty versus current experiences with poverty versus defining it as a lack of resources (Hoy, Thompson, and Zheng 2010). While these assessments provide hard numbers, how do sociologists analyze poverty when "one man's poverty is another's wealth" (Cosser 1965:141)? Because of the various ways individuals can interpret their social position, a more qualitative understanding of what poverty means to the individual is necessary.

In that regard, poverty will be conceptualized in this piece in two mutually reinforcing ways. First, poverty can be defined as a social category that emerges through societal definition (Cosser 1965). According to Simmel (1965:140), "[t]he poor person, sociologically speaking, is the individual who receives assistance because of this lack of means," which means poverty is something *done* unto individuals. Furthermore, poverty is only accomplished if "others—individuals, associations, communities—attempt to correct this condition" (Simmel 1965:140), meaning that society places individuals into that category. Here, poverty must be understood as something society constructs, and, to some extent, the individual accepts as a defining characteristic. In this definition, poverty is a social category people are put into by society at large that "cannot be understood sociologically in terms of low income or deprivation but rather in terms of the social response to such deprivations" (Cosser 1965:142).

However, others argue that poverty can be viewed as something that an individual actively *does*. In this regard, individuals "do difference" (West and Zimmerman 2009) by interacting in meaningful ways with the signs and symbols of a particular category. For example, people can "do race" differently: by focusing on different aspects of their identity in different circumstances, reinforcing and challenging various conceptions as they see fit. However, this active method of being part of a social group implies that individuals are continuously held accountable by society for the way they act in relationship to any number of social categories to which they belong (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Social class, then, is something

accomplished, not just one's societal category. Also, "depending on how race, gender, and class are accomplished, what looks to be the same activity may have different meanings for those engaged in it" (West and Fenstermaker 1995:32). Therefore, individuals' interpretations of their situations affect what poverty means to them.

Finally, there are certain objective characteristics or monetary indicators that might be assigned to one's social category or class. For example:

It is possible to sort members of society in relation to these indicators, and it is the job of many public agencies (e.g., those administering aid to families with dependent children, health benefits, food stamps, legal aid, and disability benefits) to do such sorting ... whatever the criteria employed by these agencies (and these clearly change over time and place), they can be clearly distinguished from the accountability of persons to class categories. (West and Fenstermaker 1995:28)

In this context, our society has clear-cut demarcations of what poverty looks like. However, the attributes that we assign to individuals in poverty must be accepted by the individual in the first place, by accepting food stamps or housing benefits, for example, for society to consider that individual in need and therefore "needy" or "poor." Individuals might have limited economic resources and be considered "poor" by the general public (not to mention by governmental assistance programs), yet choose not to identify themselves as poor. By "doing poor" in a way that deemphasizes their relative poverty, individuals can try their best to disengage with such a label.

### Previous Social Class Background and Interactions With Poverty

A major aspect of one's life that affects how one interacts with institutional poverty is through one's past class background. Empirical research shows individuals in similar objective circumstances, like waiting in line at a grocery store, enact class identities in different ways, dependent on their past class backgrounds. For example, an individual who has used food stamps in the past might be more likely to perceive a sense of judgment on behalf of the cashier in general, rather than an individual who has never used food stamps (Mickelson and Williams 2008; Reutter et al. 2009; Morris 2012). Simply put, past experiences with a certain social class color the way individuals view the world, even if they are objectively part of another social class at the time of the experience. With this understanding, I refer to the class one was raised in as one's previous social class background.

One of the most common ways that having a previous class background of poverty influences individuals is that they are more apt to feel judged or disparaged by others. Researchers show that having a low socio-economic status comes with certain stigmas, like being thought of as lazy or irresponsible (Reutter et al. 2009). Stigmas are visible signs, or attributes, that discredit people who have them and make them seem less desirable by others in most social situations (Goffman 1963). Goffman (1963:3) defines stigma as "an attribute that makes [a person] different from others in the category of persons available for him [or her] to be, and of a less desirable kind—in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak."

The negative effects of stigma are psychological additions and hardships to any tangible difficulties individuals must face, and can lead to depression and a sense of low self-worth (Mickelson and Williams 2008). For stigmatized individuals, "[p]ersonal feelings of shame and their actual experiences with societal stigma and discrimination are intertwined" (Mickelson and Williams 2008:926), which means there is a certain amount of reflexivity in understanding one's social position before one internalizes a stigmatized identity. Furthermore, that internalized negativity can manifest itself in later experiences that might otherwise not be viewed in a negative light by people who have not experienced such stigma (e.g., the supermarket example above).

To be seen as normal or acceptable, the stigmatized individual practices stigma management, which is the use of different tools to conceal or minimize the stigmatizing sign, otherwise known as managing the impression of themselves they give to others. Because individuals who live below the poverty line are more likely to face unequal hardships both physically and mentally, the ways that lower class individuals protect themselves from the stigma of being poor are multiple. For example, when pressed about issues relating to social class, working class individuals can be "ambivalent, defensive, or reluctant," which might be a way to enact "protection and resistance, as class and class identification are emotive issues that may make people feel uncomfortable" (Faber 2012:186). Other times, individuals might self-differentiate, saying one "type" of poor person is inherently worse than the other "type"—often the type to which the respondent self-identifies (Morris 2012).

This interaction with objective poverty is different for people with previous social class backgrounds in the middle or upper class. For these individuals, any experience they may have later in life with poverty is sometimes looked at as a bizarre circumstance, and not as a manifestation of life choices or an innate moral flaw. Essentially, the social class that an individual grew up in colors and skews one's perception of current social class in impactful ways. One useful way to examine this is in the case of Hurricane Katrina, where one's pre-storm upbringing and status afforded individuals more opportunities to use internal resources in a time of a natural disaster that, seemingly, equalized all individuals (Jackson and Dellinger 2011). During Hurricane Katrina, middle class individuals dealing with the bureaucracy and miscommunication in lines for social services and FEMA may feel a sense of anger and frustration (Haney 2011) that people raised in lower class backgrounds are already used to dealing with because of previous experiences with sluggish social services. In these circumstances, one's privileged status might make the stigma one might experience in asking for social services less internalized (Rosenblum and Travis 2008). Individuals with different past experiences with poverty might experience the same objective situation much differently. On the other hand, using social services might lead individuals not used to this action to perceive a sense of "middle class guilt and socio-economic stigma" (Barber 2011:86). Here, individuals with previous middle class backgrounds must grapple with a sense of unease for using a community service that they might have never thought they would need to use. In sum, one's previous experience with privilege or poverty changes one's perceptions of the world, even when,

for whatever reason, all things are held equal for individuals in a particular experience.

### The AmeriCorps Program

A particularly salient place to examine the interplay of one's past social class and one's current social class, and ways an individual might "do poor," is the AmeriCorps program. The AmeriCorps program is administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, and is actually made up of three subsections: AmeriCorps\*State and National, where members primarily work for local and state organizations as hands-on volunteers; AmeriCorps\*VISTA, where members are more involved with administrative procedures and management of their volunteer site; and AmeriCorps\*National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), the national disaster mobilization team (AmeriCorps NCCC n.d.). Today, AmeriCorps provides 75,000 service opportunities per year for people over the age of seventeen to tutor and mentor youth, improve health services, clean parks and streams, respond to disasters, and build organizational capacities, among other services (AmeriCorps 2012b).

Eighty-five percent of AmeriCorps members come from working or middle class backgrounds, 7% come from upper class backgrounds, and 8% come from lower class backgrounds; 41% of the members are White, 25% African-American, and 24% Hispanic American, with American Indian, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and multi-racial making up the other 10%; women make up 70% of the population (Marshall and Magee 2005). With the increase in

a retired population in recent years, the coming-of-age of the millennial generation, and with a decrease in the amount of paid jobs available to many individuals, "it is clear that large areas of social life will rely heavily on voluntary work, given the unlikelihood of substantially enhanced funding for those activities to be undertaken by paid labor" (Blyton and Jenkins 2007:234). Thus, the AmeriCorps program provides a rich area of study that might grow even larger in the years to come (Frumkin and Jastrzab 2010).

AmeriCorps is also a unique organization because it provides a stipend for members. A stipend is "some level of financial remuneration paid to an individual for performing volunteer service. The service is voluntary, and the remuneration is designed not to be equivalent to market wages" (McBride et al. 2011:850). Ideally, such pay is designed to allow those who may not have the economic ability to volunteer a way to afford to do so. However, for full-time employment, the stipend is not very much money. In 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) estimated poverty guideline for an individual in all States except Hawaii and Alaska was \$11,170. According to governmental definitions, those who earn below the line live in poverty, those who earn above do not (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). This guideline, or a percentage thereof like 125% or 200%, is used by federal agencies around the country like HHS and the Department of Labor to determine eligibility for federal assistance programs like food stamps or Family Planning Services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). AmeriCorps members earn approximately \$9,500 to \$10,900 annually, depending on the cost of living of their service area (AmeriCorps 2012c), making them

eligible for financial assistance like food stamps and institutionally labeling them as people in poverty. Therefore, AmeriCorps is in a unique position of remunerating its volunteers, while still paying them a low level of income, where we can see the interplay of raised class, current class, and "doing poor."

Some previous research has examined the ways that members of service groups engage and think of those that they serve. Due to daily struggles and conflicting views of what members of service organizations *think* they should be doing and what is actually required of them (e.g., thinking they should be making sweeping changes in the lives of those they serve, but, in reality, being required to perform mundane or rudimentary tasks), members in the social work industry can experience strain (Best 2008). One other area of strain for those who work in the service industry is in engaging with populations they serve who live qualitatively different lives. For instance, longitudinal research shows AmeriCorps members who live with the population they serve have a short-term negative appreciation for ethnic and cultural diversity, though this does subside over time (Frumkin et al. 2009). Further, recent research on international volunteering shows potentially problematic understandings of individuals' perceptions of the populations they serve. Carano (2013) argues that individuals in the social work industry have various levels of understanding of the population that they serve, with the most basic level being thinking of those they are aiding in basic, stereotyped ways. Volunteer tourists, those who enter in a foreign country to help for a short period of time, often conceptualize poverty in a way that romanticiz-

es the plight of those they serve, and do little to challenge their own conceptions of consumerism (Crossley 2012).

### Research Questions

Often, post-college, middle/upper class individuals are making such little money that they are below the poverty line, turning to social services that they never experienced before, while serving those who have used those services for larger portions of their lives. Do AmeriCorps members think of themselves as poor, internalizing the stigma that that self-identification entails? If so, in what ways do their identities change? If not, what steps do members take to manage this challenge to their identities and maintain a sense of self removed from the idea of a "poor" identity? Finally, how does the way AmeriCorps members think of themselves affect how they think of those they serve?

### Methods

To answer these questions, I conducted twenty-two in-depth interviews with AmeriCorps members from different AmeriCorps sites across the country, gaining access to participants through existing contacts with AmeriCorps members in two large cities in Washington State and using snowball sampling of local members for smaller communities in Illinois. The purpose of this strategy was to reach a variety of respondents in terms of raised class, gender, and race. Interviews lasted from 33 to 95 minutes, with an average of 66 minutes, and were conducted wherever was most convenient for the respondent. Interviews were conducted for members of AmeriCorps

who had served between the years of 2009 and 2012 at these sites.

My methods were guided by my own relationship with AmeriCorps, having been a member for two years in Washington. My past experience as an AmeriCorps member made communicating with respondents easier because I was able to reference various acronyms, events, and job descriptions. Furthermore, my previous experience with the program allowed me to come up with interview questions that were well understood by this sample. While my previous role might have made me focus on asking certain research questions based on my AmeriCorps experience, which could limit the amount of interviewee input, I attempted to counter overly influencing the questionnaire with my personal experience through a rigorous process of interview guide construction. I went through several drafts of questions, then work-shopped my interview guide with colleagues, having fellow sociologists look over the interview guide and provide me with feedback on question wording. Furthermore, I adopted an interview approach that allowed subjects to guide conversations. Therefore, I feel confident that my respondents were able to offer their own perceptions of AmeriCorps, as much as possible using a questionnaire I devised.

The sample consisted of 12 women and 10 men: eight White women and six White men, two Latino women and two Latina men, two Asian/Pacific Islander men and one Asian/Pacific Islander woman, and one African-American woman, for a total of twenty-two respondents. Problematically for understanding variations in race, the sites I used had low

rates of African-American members, with the one African-American woman I interviewed representing one-third of the African-American population at the sites for the years studied. Eight respondents said they were raised lower class, nine respondents said they were raised middle class, and five respondents said they were raised upper or upper/middle class. While this is not a representative sample of the AmeriCorps population, especially because of the higher percentage of people from low income backgrounds and the lack of African-American input, this sample has diversity enough to speak to many interpretations of the AmeriCorps experience.

After the interviews, I transcribed the results using NVivo 9 software and line-coded each interview for emerging themes, which included “reasons for joining,” “ideas of ‘service,’” and “thoughts on efficacy of AmeriCorps” in addition to relevant themes that I had gleaned from the literature, such as “stigma” and “enacting an identity.” I then put these themes into mutually exclusive categories and analyzed the themes that emerged in the open coding of the interviews and the pre-determined codes from the literature. Finding a substantial amount of information in the codes about interactions with poverty and identifying as someone in poverty, I then re-examined my transcripts for any potential reinforcements or contradictions to themes I had established.

One limitation of this study is that cross-sectional qualitative interviewing is effective at understanding the stories or thoughts that individuals think are most salient to them, but might fail to see some of the more implicit and subtle ways that members *learn* how they came to their conclusions about

themselves. Further, having people attempt to answer questions about events that have happened in the past is somewhat contentious because it relies on selective memories of individuals (Rubin and Rubin 2012). To counter these problems, I attempted to make the interviews as open and free-flowing as possible, to allow for individuals to input their own stories of coming-to-terms with identity or to provide key details that might be missed using more structured survey methods.

## Findings

Though there was substantial variation in each respondent’s relationship with poverty, a relatively “typical” experience emerged in the interviewees’ reports. This experience involved the member first encountering the signs and symbols of poverty through public assistance, meaning most members had no prior experience with poverty before the program, having previous social class backgrounds where assistance was not needed. Following that, members reported not internalizing these symbols into their identities through the use of joking, or by appealing to their resources beyond pay. Finally, members reported reaping benefits from their experience in AmeriCorps by “bonding” with those they served, and claiming their experience in poverty will strengthen their money skills later in life.

## Encountering “Poor”

For thirteen out of twenty-two respondents, their first encounters with institutionalized poverty were the waiting room at their local Department of Health Services (DHS) to get their food stamps card,

and actually using the card at the grocery store. Five respondents had previously used public assistance and food stamps in the past, and four members never used public assistance during the AmeriCorps program, despite their eligibility or because they were married to someone who earned enough to disable them from using such resources. The DHS office and the grocery store are two major locations where individuals present an image of being in poverty to the outside world, publicly acknowledging that they represent themselves as members of the social category of “poor.”

## The Waiting Room

Sixteen respondents reported that entering the waiting room of the DHS was a major boundary to cross (all respondents who had not used public assistance, and three respondents who had previously used public assistance), and many indicated a sense of feeling removed or separated from others in the waiting room. Oftentimes, they reported distress at being in the position of needing to apply. For instance, Tony, a Japanese/White 22-year-old stated:

It’s kind of funny because I was fresh out of college and in AmeriCorps and I was waiting in line and it was one of those new situations ... I’m around all these people and I feel like I don’t belong there because I grew up middle class and here are all of these lower class individuals around me, and I felt kind of out of my element, and it was kind of weird.

Tony speaks to the sense of discomfort at being in this environment and explicitly suggests that his middle class background had sheltered him from

entrée into the world of social services, as reported by Haney (2011). Other respondents echoed his statement, saying how they did not “feel like” the other people in the waiting room for some intangible reason. Betty, a White 21-year-old, mirrored this sentiment by saying:

I don't want to be rude, but I felt like when I was there [the DHS office], that's where dreams go to die. Like it was something from a movie. It was dimly lit, like fluorescent lights that kept flickering. There were people there with, like, eighteen kids running around, screaming, like dirty, and when I was sitting there, I felt like I didn't belong.

Here, Betty differentiates herself from others in the waiting room, and uses language that better fits a depressing movie rather than a social services office, implying a sense of unreality and non-acceptance of her position in this situation. Betty, seeing herself as intrinsically different from others in that room, corroborates the finding of Morris (2012) in that she forms boundaries between her and others in the same situation.

Betty's experience mirrored that of Ariel, a White 22-year-old who had a previous middle class background, who reported that the experience was “bizarre.” While asking for food stamps was new, Ariel acknowledged that she had been in the position to ask for financial services before: student loans. However, she felt no dissonance entering the student loan offices and asking for a student loan in a “cushy” student loan office, because it was in line with the system that she was raised in. This points to the idea that there may not be something intrinsi-

cally stigmatizing about asking for aid, if only such aid is not labeled as aid specifically for “low income” individuals. This is similar to the sense of unreality and middle class guilt expressed in accounts on using social services in Hurricane Katrina (Barber 2011). Ariel, like residents of post-Katrina New Orleans, suggests that asking for aid is acceptable only under specific circumstances, like bettering one's education or in cases of disaster. Asking for help beyond those specific circumstances, help earmarked for people in poverty and thus indicative of a moral failing, leads to a sense of unease and dissonance. Using a service, then, is seen as acceptable as long as it is a service *for* that particular “type” of person.

On the other hand, three individuals felt removed from those in the waiting room *because* of their previous experiences with social services, and the idea that they felt they had moved beyond that stage in their lives. Daniel, a 24-year-old Latino who had been raised in three foster homes after turning ten, put off applying for months, primarily:

Because of my biological mother, she was not exactly a role model for me and for my entire life we've been on some form of welfare, especially in regard to food, some sort of food assistance. So, I just thought I could not bring myself to do it for a long time, so that was a source of frustration.

Daniel uses his own background and recalls his impression of the stigma he originally perceived by being raised on public assistance, which contrasts the background of Ariel, but which also shows that the identity of a “food stamps user” is not desirable by the individual applying. In this way, Daniel points

to his previous background experience with social service coloring his current state of mind about using such services (Mickleson and Williams 2008). Furthering this point, Shanice, an African-American female raised with public assistance who joined AmeriCorps directly after college, stated, “with this degree, I'm like, ‘Why do I feel like I'm backtracking?’ Like, why do I need food stamps?” In sum, for individuals raised without public assistance, and for some who were raised on assistance, the waiting room provides a potent challenge to one's sense of identity, either as middle class or as a sense of being an individual moving beyond needing assistance.

This challenge to one's sense of self is further complicated by the introduction of race into one's use of social services. While there is a perceived understanding that being a food stamps user is undesirable, Hannah, a Latina, spoke to her perception of being stereotyped:

I was just so convinced it was the worst thing you could do [using food stamps] and this might, I don't know, I think people look down on you when you have to ask for that help, and, you know, and then there's the added thing, so, you know, I'm a minority, too, so it's like, what are they thinking? [Pause. Eyes well up with tears.] Excuse me ... so, yeah, it was really difficult to apply.

These recollections of the experience in the waiting room, and individuals' internalizations of these experiences, present an image of AmeriCorps members as entering a foreign world, where one's sense of identity is challenged by their situational reality as someone applying for food stamps. Hannah's

emotional response to talking about applying for food stamps reveals the difficulty of the stigma, and indicates the added complication of being a minority applying for services. Unlike her White counterparts, Hannah has the additional psychological cost of “doing race” (West and Fenstermaker 1995), and doing so negatively (by using social services).

On the other hand, two members interviewed expressed no shame or perceived stigma in the application process, and all had previously used public assistance in the past. For example, Jeremy, a Pacific Islander, said, “I was like, ‘whatever.’ I was like, ‘I need this and so I'm going to get it.’ That was it.” This is an interesting departure from Daniel's and Shanice's accounts where they expressed distaste in relation to their previous experiences with the card, signifying that other factors play a role in determining one's level of perceived stigma than solely having used the card in the past or not. Jeremy later pointed to knowing family members who had used food stamps in the past moving away from the service, indicating both his experience with seeing food stamps as just a stepping stone and the family support and lack of stigma he perceived coming from them.

Four other respondents, all White, reported family circumstances making the card unnecessary, like Diane, who did not apply for stamps because her “husband works. He has a job that would be above the limit,” and who reported that she would not have applied anyway because they were still “well enough off” to not need assistance. These subjects, however, reported being able to *not* apply for food stamps was a benefit, implying that applying was negative and undesirable.

## The Grocery Store

Of the eighteen respondents who had applied and received food stamps, all spoke to some sort of discomfort using the food stamps card. Many times interviewees expressed concern that others would view them negatively for having the card. Tina said, “I think I did feel a little bit [pause] self-conscious about it. Like maybe people would think differently ... that they would think lowly of me.” Grace, a 24-year-old White female, furthered this idea when she stated she felt, “[a] little awkward ... because that’s never something that I’ve had to deal with before and I don’t think of myself as someone underprivileged enough to be, have the right to food stamps.” Here, Grace not only represents the fear she had using the card, but also the fact that she did not consider herself somebody “underprivileged enough” to have it, signifying there is an image of who *really* needs food stamps in Grace’s perception, and Grace is not that person.

Respondents also reported trying to not let strangers, friends, or family know they had food stamps. For example, Tony said he would just say “EBT” to the cashier to “be a little more discrete” about how he was paying for his groceries to strangers in the line. Natalie, a 24-year-old Latina, reported, “[s]o, when I first got it, I didn’t really tell anybody that I got it because I didn’t want to hear any comments.” Also, Chuck, a 23-year-old White male, said, “my girlfriend still, I don’t think she even knows that I’m on food stamps. So, it’s just, I don’t advertise it.”

Why hide this card? Respondents reported experiencing a sense of shame in using the card, especially

at the beginning of the term of service. Jeremy, who had previously reported feeling no stigma in *applying* for the card, described his experience using the card:

Yeah, at the beginning when I gave my card to the cashier, I was wondering what they thought about me ... there was a little bit of shame locked out in there. I was like, I don’t know what this person is thinking about me, if they think I’m poor, I don’t have a job, whatever it is.

Pointing out the various stereotypes that come with using public assistance, such as not having a job, Jeremy understands and acknowledges the social ramifications of using the card in the first place, even though he earlier reported seeing no shame in the *idea* of the card—in that it could be used as a way to make ends meet for a temporary period of time. Jeremy questions whether the cashier would see him as poor, signifying that he does not define being poor as the attribute of one who receives some sort of assistance (Simmel 1965), but in some other intangible way. Daniel, who had struggled to even apply, paralleled this statement in response to the question of how he felt about using the card:

I had the same experience every time, first to last, and it goes back to this notion of family history involved with it all. My context automatically makes me feel ashamed to have to use that. I felt some form of shame every time.

Jeremy and Daniel point out the presence of shame in using the food stamps card, but suggest different perceptions of shame over time, perhaps related to their previous experience with financial assistance.

Many AmeriCorps members reported experiencing an additional level of discomfort while shopping for groceries because they did not look like the “typical” food stamps user. Many AmeriCorps members engage in service at schools, non-profits, and community centers (AmeriCorps 2012b), where workers are expected to dress professionally. Ariel worked for a non-profit that offered after-school and in-school tutoring, and the dress code was business casual, and she reported the tension in her dress and shopping for groceries:

And there were times I would feel really self-conscious because I felt like the clothes I was wearing, then this person shouldn’t have food stamps. Like, I’m wearing heels and a skirt and my hair’s all done up and my makeup’s all done up and it looks like I’m going to this sort of professional job, and then buying lunch on food stamps.

This discrepancy between looking middle class and using poverty class resources added to members’ unease. Dawn furthered this idea and added the component of race, saying,

I don’t know how to put this, but, like, I guess I feel like I don’t necessarily look like a person who would be using food stamps. And, so, sometimes I’m like, I kind of just wonder what the cashier or like other people think. Because I don’t want to make it sound like people who have food stamps don’t dress well or look dirty, I’m like a White, blonde girl, and I, you know, like to go shopping and buy clothes [laughs]. So, I don’t necessarily scream poverty.

Both Ariel and Dawn implicitly assume White, well-dressed women are not the types of people to be on

food stamps, and suggest others view food stamp users in the same way. Gabriel, a self-reported “fashionable” male, furthered the idea of racial differences in food stamp use, but pointed to his experience as a Latino:

It’s not like I dress like a bum, hobo, or anything, I dress in decent clothing ... like, you see these T-shirts, you know that they’re not just purchased in random little places. They’re hard to find [pointing to nice, Internet-bought T-shirt]. I kind of felt like people would look at me like, what do you need these for? Are you really poor or are you just leeching off the unemployment system, you know, food stamps? So in some respects, yeah, I was feeling like I was kind of being stereotyped.

Despite Gabriel’s upper class dress, he reported that his experience being a Latino entered into how he perceived the cashier’s treatment—given his race, there was no way to avoid being seen as, in his words, “leeching off the system.” Ariel and Dawn, on the other hand, did not explicitly mention a racial identification process. However, the idea of what a food stamps user should look like, and what the AmeriCorps member *did* look like, manifested itself in all three accounts. Respondents were very aware of the cultural stigma of poverty, and acknowledged that, by dressing professionally, a perception that cashiers think they are scamming the system. On the other hand, not dressing well might better fit the cultural representation of someone who is poor, which might lead to more stigmatization. With food stamps and nicer clothes, there seems to be no winning.

In sum, AmeriCorps members’ initial reactions to their situation showed discomfort and apprehension

with the DHS office and the use of food stamps. Furthermore, while most AmeriCorps members reported discomfort in using the services, the reasons behind that discomfort varied based on one's previous experiences with class, race, and, interestingly enough, fashion sense. AmeriCorps members reported feeling uncomfortable with the signs associated with traditional definitions of poverty (Hoy, Thompson, and Zheng 2010), and addressed conceptions that food stamp use is viewed as the actions of lazy, irresponsible people (Reutter et al. 2009).

### Doing "Not Poor"

Though AmeriCorps members experienced shame and discomfort with the association they had with poverty, eighteen out of twenty-two explicitly did not identify themselves as poor individuals in response to the direct question—"While you were a member of AmeriCorps, did you ever consider yourself to be poor?"—suggesting their definitions of poor were indeed malleable to individual interpretations, and were less of an external, objective category. Members use two primary methods to distance themselves from the potential identity as a "poor" person: joking about their poverty to each other, and appealing to their middle class roots.

### Joking Away Stigma

Many AmeriCorps members reported joking about their income as the major way they ever discussed themselves as being poor. By joking, AmeriCorps members could both talk about their experiences living in poverty, but separate themselves from the serious negative ramifications that come with that

identity, changing the impression that they give to others (Goffman 1963). For example, Riley stated, "[we] just kind of joked about being a poor person, like temporary poverty or something," and in that way the whole process did not "feel particularly real." Ariel furthered this idea:

**Researcher:** Did you ever consider yourself to be a "poor person?"

**Ariel:** I joked about myself being a poor person, but I knew that I wasn't.

**Researcher:** How come? You were living below the poverty line.

**Ariel:** Yes, we all joked about how poor we were and how little money we made and, uh, I mean, it's not we were bitching about it. We all expected to make not very much money, right, and work for pennies. That's part of being an AmeriCorps, that's what you do.

By saying that she "knew" that she was not poor, Ariel could differentiate herself from those who really were poor, in her mind. Hannah also told a story about leaving her purse on a seat she was saving and yelling to the small crowd, "Don't anybody steal my purse. I'm poor! Don't take my food stamps!" Here, Hannah used a joke to simultaneously announce that she was living in this situation, but that she did not take this situation too seriously, perhaps because interpreting her financial situation as something serious might lead to a concrete self-identification as "poor," and more stigmatization.

These jokes also helped AmeriCorps members bond with other members. Both Riley and Ariel mention that fellow members joked about their lack of funds,

and Daniel revealed how joking within the workplace reinforced camaraderie:

So, we made lots of jokes ... it went so far as to, like, we got AmeriCorps stickers, just bumper sticker size things. All of us, we had them on our desk and we crossed out the "Corps" part of it and put in "Poor."

Here, Daniel points to a way he stated his low income (through the bumper sticker), made it humorous, and bonded with fellow AmeriCorps members through it (through having them all write the same joke on the bumper sticker). His social response to the deprivations of funds he experienced as an AmeriCorps member worked to remove himself from the social category of being in poverty (Simmel 1965) and signified his attempt to show off a self with a sense of humor about the situation.

Finally, some members reported joking about their lack of funds with family and close friends. For example, Andrew, a White 21-year-old male, spoke about having conversations with his girlfriend about his AmeriCorps job: "We always joke, like, we're going to be poor if we get married, we're going to be very poor." Overall, though, members almost exclusively reported joking about their lack of funds with other AmeriCorps workers, sometimes with other friends and family members, once with a general crowd of people (in Hannah's story above), but never with the people that they served.

### Appealing to Resources

Another way that AmeriCorps members dissociated from any pretense of being poor was through

appealing to the fact that they come from a middle class or upper class background; therefore, the poverty they experience is unlike "real" poverty, and is only temporary in nature (Barber 2011). Though these individuals often prided themselves on living away from their families and forging a life by working long hours in the AmeriCorps program, they still claimed the tangible resources they could access through family members separated them from being part of the social category of those in poverty, despite the use of institutional services.

Dawn said she had access to "a lot of resources and people and support to fall back on if I were to, like, ever face a really hard financial time." Notice here that she did not claim that she was in the middle of a "really hard financial time" during the AmeriCorps program, signifying that her low level of pay did not equate to the sense of desperation she associated with being poor. Similarly, William, acknowledging his pre-AmeriCorps experience, said:

Even though my salary is low, I'm not coming out of poverty, so I don't have the other things that come with being out of poverty. Because of my family resources, I have a family that can rally around me, places [where] I never worry about a roof over my head.

By appealing to the resources of his family, William (intentionally or not) separates himself from those who do not have such resources—those who he perceives to truly be poor. Others pointed to resources they currently benefit from provided by their families. For instance, Betty, a 21-year-old White female, mentioned that her housing situation was uniquely beneficial, by saying, "I live in a house by

myself, but since my family owns the house, I don't have to pay rent, so, luckily, that was taken care of." Others reported parents paying for cell phone bills or their car insurance. Therefore, members report there were actual tangible benefits and resources AmeriCorps members were not in want for, or that they knew they could easily access if need be. In this way, members might be managing the stigma of living in poverty, minimizing their "poor" experiences to ensure that they are not viewed as truly not well-off (Goffman 1963).

Proving this idea, those four individuals not on public assistance at the time of the interview reported that AmeriCorps members *did* suffer a tangible lack of resources, and indeed *were* "poor." Janice, who was married and did not apply for food stamps, said, "I know that they [AmeriCorps] try to provide you accommodations with being that poor." Diane, who did not use food stamps because her husband had a "good paying job," said that while "no one in America is poor compared to the definition of poor that the majority of people in our society in the world defines as poor," AmeriCorps members, in relation to "so many more people in America," were poor. This only furthers the idea that, for the individual, poverty is not a social category that one is placed into, but instead how one chooses to interpret and manage that identity (Coser 1965).

In sum, respondents reported not internalizing a "poor" identity. One way they removed themselves from this identity was by joking about their situation and making light of the level of poverty they faced. Another way was when individuals appealed to their either real or perceived resources

to differentiate themselves from people who were "truly poor." Given this, it seems easy to conclude that AmeriCorps members do not feel any sense of being enmeshed in a "poor" identity. However, such verbal techniques might be ways to manage undesired stigma (Goffman 1963), and the findings below reveal that individuals' interpretations of their experiences with poverty complicate the idea that individuals truly do not see themselves in such a category.

### Doing "Poor" (Positively)

Ultimately, once AmeriCorps members separated themselves from internalizing identities as poor people, they were able to use their objective poverty (as measured in income and use of resources) in AmeriCorps in beneficial ways. They worked to frame the potential hardship (poverty) into a valuable attribute (both for current service and for their own futures). In this way, members "do poor" by pointing to the positives that come to them from making such low wages (West and Fenstermaker 1995). Members did this by pointing to the benefits of making such little money for 1) relating to the population they served and 2) the fact that later in life they would be making more money and AmeriCorps provided a valuable baseline from which to start their fiscal responsibility.

#### Access to Individuals

While members reported not internalizing a poor identity, they used their experiences with poverty to relate to those who they were serving. For example, Diane, who said that her family had gone through

a major transition when she was laid off from her job, and who worked as an academic mentor for a low income school, said there was one positive to the low pay in that, "it allowed me to know that the students who I worked with were not even blessed enough to have the lifestyle that I had currently. You know, living on the AmeriCorps salary." Here, Diane points to her AmeriCorps pay as one way to relate to the people she served, and indeed interprets her situation in a new light (West and Fenstermaker 1995), using her low wages to identify in some way with the population she served. While she still did not *identify* with the population she served by pointing to her resources as a major differentiator, she acknowledged a newfound appreciation of their plight and attributed that to her experience with the AmeriCorps salary.

Members appealed to tangible experiences that they had not faced before in their interactions with those they served. For instance, Dawn, who worked with homeless youth, said:

I know that I will never be in this position that these kids are in or their families. But, I also know that I am having to access public services like food stamps and, um, kind of understanding like dealing with [DHS] and understanding some of the issues that they are facing.

Here, Dawn reinforces the benefits of her experience with the social services to bond with those she serves, while, as written above, she reported feeling uneasiness around cashiers because she felt they saw her as someone much different than the people she served. By stating, "I know that I will never be in this position," Dawn explicitly separates herself

from those she serves, and manages the stigma of using such social services by pointing to her service use almost as a training experience.

William mentioned how his experience with social services would allow him to be able to better relate to his population because he had gone through at least a "facsimile of the experiences they might go through on a daily basis." Similarly, Ariel reported being better able to communicate and understand the circumstances of the individuals she was serving because of her experience with the same services:

There were definitely times later when I would relate my experiences within the social services office with people who I was working with and they were like, "Oh yeah, they suck and they're so slow there." It became something I have.

Note how her experience becomes something she reported *having*, a tool to use in her interactions with others, and not something that she actively internalizes into her sense of self.

Diane, Dawn, William, and Ariel reframed their lived experience—that of living in poverty—to better relate to the population that they serve. However, language such as Diane's "not even blessed enough to have the lifestyle that I had currently," Dawn's "I know that I will never be in this position that these kids are in or their families," William's "facsimile of the experience," and Ariel's "something I have" all show a sense of separation that the members report experiencing from those who, ironically, they report bonding with. In short, members emphasize the benefits of doing



certain aspects of a “poor” identity, while removing themselves from truly internalizing that role (West and Fenstermaker 1995).

### A Sense of Accomplishment

Another benefit that AmeriCorps members reported having from their experience living below the poverty line was the sense of accomplishment they had in living a low income life. Many members looked forward to moving past the AmeriCorps program to higher paying jobs, and often expressed gratitude for learning how to live off of low wages because more funds would look *that* much greater after their experience. For example, Hannah, who as an AmeriCorps VISTA member made even less than most members, said, “part of the experience is to really understand what poverty is and I would say that, ‘Mission accomplished, VISTA.’ I know what poverty is now.” Hannah, being one of the individuals who did state that she felt “poor” during her AmeriCorps tenure, provided the insight that the poverty felt was all part of the AmeriCorps experience, and something that one could move away from. These poverty experiences provide members a space to grow from, but often do not constitute “reality” in the same sense as someone enmeshed in such an experience (Barber 2011; Haney 2011).

Other members pointed out that the tight budgetary constraints of the program provided discipline. For instance, James, a White male who served in his early thirties, said,

I had only so much money so I had to monitor my activities; I had to monitor of what I spent in terms of

gas, I had to be more considerate in, like, my grocery shopping. I had to make sure not to go over budget at all.

Chuck reported attending more free community events because of his low level of pay, “which I guess is part of what you’re supposed to do as an AmeriCorps member, anyway.” While the need for budgeting and living in poverty might have been a potential hardship, these AmeriCorps members interpreted it as an opportunity to grow.

Furthermore, members also think of AmeriCorps as a tool for teaching them to greatly appreciate the funds they may receive in the future in the private or public, non-AmeriCorps setting. In the words of Daniel, “I remember thinking at the time, ‘I cannot wait to get an actual real paying job. I cannot wait to move past this experience and be able to actually make a living wage,’” but that once he got through living on AmeriCorps wages, he could get through living on anything. In this way, AmeriCorps is not only a tool for budgeting and an experience to move away from, it is also an opportunity to see one’s future prospects in a positive light. William provided the best example of this, when he said that AmeriCorps has provided him the benefit of living within his means and that, when he looks into his hopeful future career as a teacher, “it’s like people say teachers don’t make anything. I look at the pay scale, I’m like, I’m going to be like Scrooge McDuck, just diving into my money!” In this way, AmeriCorps members accept the negative aspects of living in poverty as long as it relates positively to their future growth, further indicating a sense of removal from having a “poor” identity, but si-

multaneously showing that elements of living below the poverty line have real ramifications on the members, at least in terms of how they present themselves to others.

### Discussion and Conclusion

Thinking of one’s self as poor can lead to negative conceptions of self and society in general (Mickelson and Williams 2008), and poverty itself is less of a concrete category that one finds one’s self in (Simmel 1965), but something that one accomplishes through accepting the identification of being poor (Cosser 1965) and living life in a way that falls in line with stereotypical “poor person behavior,” making that identity most salient (West and Fenstermaker 1995). By examining individuals in the AmeriCorps program, this piece argues that, despite the external attributes of one’s situation (e.g., living below the poverty line and receiving food stamps from the government), an individual’s interpretation of his or her state of being is more nuanced in the context of temporality, proximity to resources, and internalized sense of self. Furthermore, even if one accepts some of the attributes that are associated with poverty, such as government assistance, one still can maintain a sense of self far removed from any association with being poor, or at least manage one’s identity to be perceived by others as not poor (Goffman 1963).

These findings suggest many AmeriCorps members experience poverty for the first time in the waiting room at the DHS and in using the food stamps card at grocery stores, and in both cases they feel discomfort and disassociation from oth-

ers around them. Then, AmeriCorps members actively work to distance themselves from a potential “poor” identity, primarily by joking about their poverty and by appealing to familial resources as reasons for why they are not “truly poor.” Despite this lack of internalization of the identity, AmeriCorps members still reap two main benefits from their service: the benefit of having a low income to relate to the population served, and the benefit AmeriCorps has in forcing people to budget their money. Therefore, they operate in a world where the positives of low pay (budget-mindedness, connection with others) are accepted into how one interprets his or her situation in AmeriCorps, but the negatives (food stamps) are not.

Despite real world labels, for the most part, AmeriCorps members do not think of themselves as poor. While this may be beneficial for AmeriCorps members, due to a lack of internalized stigma (Mickelson and Williams 2008), and by virtue of representing themselves in such a way that certain members of society do not see them as fitting in such a category (e.g., by wearing nicer clothing or discussing their well-off parents), leading to less external stigma (Goffman 1963), the negative side is that individual members might perpetuate stereotypes and ideas about the poor people they serve. This was especially clear in discussions on how different members felt at the grocery store and the waiting room from those they considered to be “truly poor.” In this sample, respondents did not feel like they were “those types” of people, and therefore they did not perceive themselves as people deserving of social stigma associated with poverty. Through joking and appealing to resources, members literally and

symbolically distance themselves from those they perceive to be the real poor, otherwise known as those they serve. Herein, members reproduce the very same hierarchies and social distances that AmeriCorps, in its mission as a community service organization, hopes to alleviate. Instead of forming relationships with those they serve in meaningful ways by acknowledging their similarities in living in poverty, members run the risk of instead forming divides and boundaries between them and the population they serve because they fail to see themselves in the same social category as their service population. While the ramifications of this in real world settings are unknown, this finding begs the question: How does this divide impact those people AmeriCorps members aim to serve? While I perceived no sense of malice in any of the interview subjects towards those they serve, it is clear that popular conceptions reinforcing a poor/not-poor divide are pervasive even in these service-minded individuals. When AmeriCorps members buy into the popular conceptions of what poverty looks like, and manage their stigma in a way that reinforces conventional views of what poverty looks like, it might be impossible for them to not inadvertently judge, and distance themselves from, those they serve.

Usually, AmeriCorps members interact with impoverished individuals who need some sort of assistance. What does it mean, then, that AmeriCorps members do not see themselves as poor, and, in fact, instead of opening up their ideas about what living in poverty means to include themselves, actually further perpetuate stereotypes of what it means to be poor *by* removing themselves from that defini-

tion? This paper provides a starting point for looking towards what interactions might exist to show that inequality is being reinforced. Clearly, differentiation occurs in these respondents' minds; with that, as West and Zimmerman (2009) ask, understanding if, and if so how, inequality is being reinforced *in practice* during interactions between members and those they serve would be the next logical step in research.

Moving past this, these findings have ramifications for sociological understandings of the self with reference to poverty, especially the ways that individuals do or do not internalize "poor identities." In this sample, AmeriCorps members do not internalize a "poor identity," and I find no real variation in race, class, or gender: neither lower income, upper class, racial minority, males, nor females were more likely to interpret their identities as "poor." What seems somewhat clear, however, is that these respondents implicitly and explicitly view their relationship of living in poverty as tied in with their previous social class background, especially their relationships with having a college education. For many of my participants, their levels of education, and to a somewhat lesser degree their family backgrounds, permanently exclude them, in their opinions, from being members of the "truly poor." Even for individuals who were raised in poverty, such as Shanice, having a degree provides a level of forward momentum that gives individuals reason to believe they are in merely a temporary stage of their lives. It seems that one's level of education has quite the impact on one's interpretation of his or her current social standing. Of course, the qualitative nature of this study does not allow for general-

izations or statistical tests of significance, but these relationships should continue to be addressed in later studies. In particular, examining how members of other volunteer organizations, such as the Peace Corps, or other volunteer organizations that do not require a college education, deal with their wages might be a particularly fruitful place to examine these topics.

Finally, this study has implications for public policy. Primarily, these findings suggest that if people have a way—any way—to say they are not poor, they will do so. This means that poverty is still a highly stigmatized status to have in America. Though AmeriCorps members might make the same amount or even less money than members of the population they serve, the fact that members do not internalize their "poor" identity, but the people they serve might internalize such an identity, points to a power imbalance between the two populations. Policy-makers and trainers might attempt to correct this power imbalance through training individual AmeriCorps members on the nature of social context of poverty, how it affects many different people at different life points, and how poverty is a social construction in itself. With this knowledge, perhaps AmeriCorps members will feel less stigmatized to adopt a "poor" identity, which might have an effect on the "poor" individuals they serve feeling less stigmatized themselves. The AmeriCorps program must understand the way members deal with living in poverty is problematic, not just for themselves, but also for those they serve.

Finally, and perhaps more abstractly, what should be done to address the broader issue of the stig-

ma and negativity facing those living in poverty and using social services? For AmeriCorps members, while addressing this matter through paying them more money would lead to less anxiety for the AmeriCorps member in navigating the world of living in poverty, such a solution would contradict the volunteer-oriented approach of the program, and would limit the tangible benefits AmeriCorps members express in living below the poverty line. However, symbolically and instrumentally restructuring the way services are offered might be a step in the right direction. Recall that Ariel previously stated a sense of ease in using student loan services because she interpreted that type of service as non-problematic, and something that one does to move ahead in life. If other services, such as food stamps or public housing, were framed in ways that established they were aid to move forward and not merely aid for aid's sake, AmeriCorps members, and most likely the people that they serve, would feel less unease and stigma in accepting such services. And, if the goal of AmeriCorps is to better the plight of low income individuals, changing the stigma of living in poverty, redefining what "poor" looks like, could only help in such a regard.

### Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Dr. Kristen Barber for her early review and comments on this piece. He also wishes to thank the members of the 2013 Midwest Sociological Society Student Paper Award Competition committee, for which an earlier draft of this piece was submitted and won second place.

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