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Adolescence, the American Dream, and the Developmental Vision

"I wouldn't be me if I hadn't grown up in Cityville."

Like Joe Mendoza, the young people who speak through these pages believe that their personal lives and their theories about the world have been deeply influenced by what they learned at home and in the schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces of Cityville, Townline, and Milltown.[1]

From life in each place, adolescents arrive at different "social identities," in Robert Lane's fine phrase:[2] they draw different conclusions about what lies in store for people like themselves and thus what it is appropriate to hope for, personally and politically. On the social maps they create of their communities, they place "fault lines" that divide allies from enemies, people they can count on from those they distrust. They encounter casts of moral and political characters from whose actions they draw lessons about privilege and power. In addition, they learn their communities' interpretations of the history of their times and how to judge the significance of the news and newsmakers.

Social identity evolves from the individual's life in groups. In focusing on community as the formative basis of group life—influencing family as well as school and neighborhood—we emphasize a crucial, yet rarely studied, aspect of development.[3] Most adults we know—of every social class—look back at the place where they grew up as a powerful influence on how they came to regard themselves

and the social world. Yet research on development is remarkably placeless, assuming some generalized individual growing up in an undifferentiated or aggregated (though occasionally regionalized) America.

The role of social class in development is also neglected and, in addition, badly distorted. When researchers do investigate class, they usually treat it as an abstraction, lifted out of place and time. Thus, one hears or reads little about the impact of community on the formation of class-identity, and there is hardly any literature on the diversity of working-class experience in different communities.[4] Moreover, we believe that the upper-middle-class bias in mainstream developmental theory has produced a stereotypical portrayal of working-class families as deficient settings, incapable of providing children with the requisites for positive growth.[5]

The social identities of promising working-class adolescents in each community are based in their positioning of themselves in relation to others: in Cityville, these young people see themselves as part of the school-oriented group, fortunate in having been encouraged to plan for the future, but also sharing, in fundamental ways, the circumstances of all Cityville youth; Townline working-class youth, Jewish and Irish, see themselves as on the disadvantaged margins of a favored, affluent community; and Milltown youth view themselves as in the midst of a friendly, familiar small town inhabited by decent, hard-working people "in the middle."

These social identities are emotionally charged. Young people's views of themselves in relation to others are accompanied by strong feelings—feelings of vulnerability in Townline or confidence in Cityville; feelings of comfortable acceptance in the consensual community of Milltown or angry or fearful marginality in the polarized community of Townline, and feelings about the distribution of privilege and power in American society—anger in Townline, resignation in Cityville, or remoteness in Milltown.

Early in our research, we were convinced of the importance of our focus on community but also troubled by questions it raised about the relative values we were placing on community and social class as formative influences in the lives of working-class youth. We wondered if we were saying that

community life is so powerful that it changes the nature of social class in each place. Did we believe that working-class youth in America are more fundamentally community-members than members of their socioeconomic class?

As the work progressed, we came to see these questions as simplistic, based in the linear, input-output models of influence so common in the social sciences. These models assume that the individual is passive, bombarded by competing forces that researchers seek to place in rank order according to their strength of influence.[6] In contrast, we based our research in the belief that individuals are always actively constructing meaning from whole experience. From this perspective, class can only be experienced in context.[7]

Thus, in pointing out the substantial differences in the social identities that emerge for working-class youth in Cityville, Townline, and Milltown, we are demonstrating the contextualization of class in process, showing how the realities of working-class life — scarcity of money and resources, parental jobs that have little dignity and security — become meaningful as individuals live their lives in particular circumstances, times, and places.

Such a contextualized conception of class — as a basic but fluid force in everyday life—is given by Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, and Dowsett in *Making the Difference*.[8] They suggest that class (and gender) are structuring processes of power rather than rigid systems of power: through these structuring processes, "social life is constantly being organized (and ruptured and disorganized) through time" (1982, p. 180). We take this to mean that although class relations are structured by the differential access to money and power of groups in society, individual members of a class construct their interpretations of social class through their actions in specific contexts and times.

Just as working-class life has been treated as monolithic and undifferentiated by place, it has been viewed as rooted in a subculture whose commitments are antithetical to the values of mainstream American culture: economic and geographic mobility, and the inner development of the individual. Our interviews open a window onto the worlds of contemporary working-class life beyond the urban village, in

which promising working-class youth confront mobility as an option.

Promising accurately conveys the situations of the youth we portray, for they consider their abilities and hopes part of the promises they make to their families, and they interpret the ideology of American society as having promised them access to the opportunities they seek. Being promising, they start out with the task of figuring out how to achieve more security and dignity than their parents have known.

When Joseph Kahl (1953) looked at the development of ambition among boys in the working-class subculture of the 1950s, he saw that young men who studied hard had to forsake their lives in the peer group, acceding instead to their parents' wishes that they become achievers. And in Herbert Gans's (1962) work, the sharp distinction between working-class and middle-class life meant that only working-class youth who became separated from peer-group life—through either special gifts or lengthy illnesses—became ambitious.

The gulf between working-class values and those of mobile America is movingly explored in Sennett and Cobb's *Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972). They argue that it is impossible for upwardly mobile working-class people in the United States to evade the double bind in which they are doomed to feel like failures if they do not move up the ladder and to disrespect themselves if, betraying their working-class origins, they do.

Our data complicate and extend this argument. On the one hand, we report working-class experience in the seventies, when higher education had become a widely accepted norm in working-class life; few of the adolescents of Cityville, Townline, and Milltown imagined that going to college would take them into worlds alien to their parents. Life in each community lent different interpretations to ambition, setting a different scope and different criteria for success. Thus, for example, promising working-class youth in Cityville saw few contradictions between their wanting to go on to college and remaining close to their families and non-college-going friends; as we show, they intended to "become somebodies while remaining themselves." Townline youth encountered