THE LIVED REALITIES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS: NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY, GOVERNMENTALITY, AND RESISTANCE IN ELKHART, INDIANA

A dissertation presented by

Andrea Hill

to
The Department of Sociology and Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of
Sociology

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
February 2016
THE LIVED REALITIES OF ECONOMIC CRISIS: NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY, GOVERNMENTALITY, AND RESISTANCE IN ELKHART, INDIANA

by

Andrea Hill

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology in the College of Social Science and Humanities Northeastern University February 2016
ABSTRACT

This research explores the lived realities of hegemonic neoliberal economics, politics, and cultural values as manifest in unemployed workers’ explanations of and responses to changing economic circumstances. An enterprising and prosperous community known as the “RV Capital of the World,” Elkhart, Indiana, has long been a thriving community with an abundance of well paid manufacturing jobs in the recreational vehicle industry. This prosperity came to a sudden and painful halt when the local RV industry collapsed in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. The community’s skyrocketing unemployment drew national media attention and multiple visits from President Obama, making Elkhart a symbol of the economic crisis and subsequent recession. This research draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Elkhart and in-depth interviews with local residents, community leaders, and 65 unemployed RV workers to illuminate the experiences of workers struggling to navigate and survive a dramatically transformed world. My findings demonstrate the complex nature of neoliberal ideological hegemony. Elkhart’s RV workers embrace the anti-union, small government and individualistic logics at the heart of neoliberalism and actively use these logics to inform their strategic responses to a bleak labor market. At the same time, they express disillusionment with growing inequality, anger at business and market practices, and a desire for a state that takes a more aggressive economic role. These workers walk a tightrope of tension as they act according to cherished values of individualism, responsibility, and enterprise, while simultaneously objecting to and resisting the neoliberal reality these values produce. This research provides empirical insight into the lived realities of neoliberal power as manifest in daily practices, thoughts, and choices and demonstrates the ways that inequality and precarity are legitimated and perpetuated through individuals’ entrepreneurial activity in their quest to find work in a bleak labor market.
In addition to contributing to existing understandings of neoliberal ideology, this examination of labor market failure and the interior lives and experiences of unemployed manufacturing workers has much to offer policymakers and those who work with unemployed individuals. My analyses of the ways in which existing unemployment policies and programs are simultaneously empowering resources and disempowering obstacles has potential use for informing how our public policies practically acknowledge, address, and alleviate the challenges of unemployment and growing precarity.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As tempted as I am to turn my thanks into apologies—for the delays, and questions, and the general burden—I’ll refrain from doing so\(^1\). This has been an extraordinarily challenging and incredibly valuable process and it would have only been the former were it not for the generous help and support I’ve received from so many.

Thank you to the people of Elkhart for being so generous with your time, respect, and genuine openness and willingness to talk and let me share your experiences.

Thank you to my committee—Matt, Danny, Steve, Ofer. You deserve an award from an official and much-respected institution\(^2\) for your tolerance of my endless delays and issues. Your willingness to work with me, advice, encouragement, and breathtaking patience and flexibility are truly award-worthy.

Thank you to my mom, for your ceaseless faith and always-appreciated\(^3\) genuine concern for my wellbeing and happiness.

Thanks to my fantastic friends: Lauren, Monica, Lispeth, Sean, Eric, Katie, Tammi, Owen, Barb, Amy, Leandra, Kat…. You’re better than I deserve and cooler\(^4\) than you imagine.

---


\(^2\) An international institution of some sort—maybe the United Nations?

\(^3\) Even when I find it annoying. I’m still glad I have you, and I love you very much,

\(^4\) I award coolness points, remember?
Finally, a special thank you that can’t be sufficiently articulated with words or humor or anything I can think of.\(^5\) Thank you, Steve. I still find myself amazed that such an extraordinary sociologist and intellect is also, truly, one of the best people I’ve ever known. Plus, your music recommendations and book suggestions have been mostly fantastic. Your patience, honesty, humor, openness, consistency, sincerity, and fundamental goodness\(^6\) are beyond measure and they mean so much to all who know you or have worked with you. I would never have finished this work without your support, feedback, and insight\(^7\). Thank you so much, Steve. You deserve more than a ‘thank you’—but I did warn you about the insufficient nature of words, so…

\(^{5}\) I guess maybe money would work …. but Marx wouldn’t like that.

\(^{6}\) And all the other positive adjectives. All. Of. Them.

\(^{7}\) I’m sincerely sorry for the cliché, but not for the sentiment. Because I don’t apologize for telling the truth (Please don’t tell Foucault that I believe there’s a truth).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... 3

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ 5

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... 7

## Chapter 1: Introduction .............................................................................................. 9
   Economic Meltdown and the Great Recession ........................................................... 12
   Ground Zero: Recessionary Elkhart ........................................................................... 24
   The Lived Experiences of Recession: Researching Elkhart ........................................ 32
      Research Questions ................................................................................................. 35
      Research Significance ............................................................................................. 36
   Overview of Dissertation ......................................................................................... 37

## Chapter 2: Researching Economic Crisis– Theoretical Framework and Methodology .... 40
   Neoliberal Hegemony ............................................................................................... 41
   Theoretical Framework ............................................................................................. 50
   Research Design and Methodology .......................................................................... 62

## Chapter 3: Entrepreneurial Heartland ...................................................................... 79
   Elkhart, Indiana ......................................................................................................... 80
   Core Community Values ......................................................................................... 87

## Chapter 4: Entrepreneurial Workers, Enterprising Selves in Good Times ............... 100
   Hegemonic Entrepreneurial Ideology ....................................................................... 100
   Entrepreneurial RV Workers .................................................................................... 106
   Analysis ...................................................................................................................... 116

## Chapter 5: In Theory, In Reality- Neoliberal Ideology in Elkhart .............................. 121
   Neoliberal Ideological Hegemony: The Economy ..................................................... 129
   Neoliberal Ideological Hegemony: The Individual ................................................... 138
   Neoliberal Ideological Hegemony: The State ............................................................ 146
   Economic Crisis ...................................................................................................... 176
   Analysis .................................................................................................................... 184

## Chapter 6: Navigating Crisis .................................................................................... 189
   RV Meltdown ........................................................................................................... 194
   Daily Realities of Recessionary Life ......................................................................... 199
   Navigating a Bleak Market ....................................................................................... 217
   Increasing Employability .......................................................................................... 241
   Working During Bad Times ....................................................................................... 261
   Analysis ...................................................................................................................... 281

## Chapter 7: Conclusion .............................................................................................. 288
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“O-ba-ma! O-ba-ma! O-ba-ma!” Enthusiastically chanting, applauding, and cheering, 1,700 Elkhart, Indiana locals were packed into the Concord Community High School gymnasium to welcome newly elected U.S. President Barack Obama to their community. It was February 9, 2009, and, on his first trip outside of the capital since his inauguration, the President was conducting an “Indiana Town Hall on Economic Recovery” to address the economic turmoil wreaking havoc throughout the nation and decimating communities like Elkhart. Waving and thanking the crowd, Obama took the stage and turned his attention to Ed Neufeldt, the local worker who would introduce him.

Ed had been preparing non-stop since receiving the invitation to introduce the President just two days earlier. He was particularly anxious about speaking because he knew that the town hall would air on all of the major U.S. television broadcast networks during prime time hours that evening. Despite the fact that he’d spoken with his pastor and had been assured that his fellow churchgoers were praying for him, Ed was still extremely nervous—he simply didn’t consider himself much of a speaker and never dreamed that he’d be speaking to the entire nation on prime time television. Standing at a podium bearing the official U.S. seal—in a suit borrowed from his brother-in-law at the last minute upon the realization that his own no longer fit—he looked out at the sea of flashing lights and television cameras and waited for the cheers to subside before he began to speak (Rowe 2009; Spalding 2012) When the applause quieted, Ed shared his story with the crowd in the gym and the millions watching from their homes:

My name is Ed Neufeldt. My wife and I have seven children ranging in ages 7 to 32 years of ages. On September 17, 2008, all of the employees at Monaco Coach were informed that due to the economy, they would be closing their doors. I had worked in the RV industry for 32 years. Two of my daughters and two of my son in laws are also unemployed. I know that Elkhart County has the highest unemployment rate in the country. But I know that we don’t want to be that. We want to work! (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009)

Indeed, the President was there to unveil his plan to boost the faltering U.S. economy—a federally funded stimulus package designed to save and create jobs, build infrastructure, and ensure the provision of public welfare services. Elkhart had been chosen as the place where he would explain this legislation to the American public because, as Ed had pointed out, the community had recently undergone the fastest, highest rise in unemployment in the nation (Calmes 2009). Often labeled “America’s Industrial Heartland,” Elkhart is a hub of industry: As the “RV Capital of the World,” the community produces 80% of RV’s sold in the U.S., and approximately 60% of the community’s economy is directly or indirectly tied to RV manufacturing and sales (Hesselbart 2007). As producers of a costly luxury consumer good, RV manufacturers are dependent on strong consumer spending—and the cheap, accessible credit that makes such spending possible. The fates of Elkhart, the RV industry, and workers like Ed are inextricably linked to the often-fickle U.S. credit market, for better and worse.

The “for worse” consequences of this relationship drew national attention when, in late summer, 2008, the failure of several major banking institutions brought the global economy to its knees. The credit collapse brought non-essential consumer spending to an almost total standstill, and the shell-shocked market made it impossible for businesses to secure the loans that would enable them to survive the downturn. Faced with plummeting revenues and no interim credit, dozens of Elkhart-area RV manufacturers and suppliers cut costs by laying off large percentages of their workforces and dramatically reducing hours for those still working.
By October 2008, the *New York Times* had identified Elkhart as “the white-hot center of the meltdown of the American economy,” noting, “The busiest spot in town seems to be the unemployment office, where 20 people stood in line on Friday and streams more passed through”(Steinhauer 2008a). Massive cutbacks simply were not enough to keep many major companies—including Monaco Coach, an RV manufacturer that had been in operation since the 1950’s—afloat. When Monaco shuttered the Elkhart plant that Ed had worked at for the past 32 years, he joined the thousands of Elkhart’s jobless RV workers—and the tens of millions of unemployed Americans—facing grim prospects in a world fundamentally transformed by the greatest economic upheaval since the Great Depression.

This bleak new world arrived with startling speed. In May 2008—just nine months before Ed introduced the President on that February afternoon—candidate Barack Obama was knocking on doors and shooting hoops at a local Elkhart playground in his quest to secure the Democratic nomination for the presidency (Tumulty 2008). Unemployment was fairly low at the time—5% nationwide and locally (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008)—and Elkhart residents had more questions about Hillary Clinton (challenging him for the nomination) than about employment and the economy.

The Elkhart of May 2008 was a scene of relative economic stability—a state that would disintegrate seemingly overnight. Having secured the Democratic nomination and now campaigning for the presidency, Obama returned to Elkhart in August 2008 to find a community in crisis. The local unemployment rate had climbed to 9.3%, nearly doubling in the three months since his May visit, and many of those still employed were working fewer and fewer hours and finding it increasingly difficult to get by (Nagourney and Thee 2008; Steinhauer 2008b).
Acknowledging this growing desperation at a town hall event held in Elkhart that August, the presidential candidate detailed his plan to halt the rapid decline by growing the economy via investments in infrastructure and alternative energy and the repeal of tax cuts for the wealthy. Looking out at the hundreds of worried faces that had gathered to hear his plan to turn the economy around, Obama said,

“If we can seize this moment, we can open the door to a new economy for the 21st century that will bring new energy, new jobs, and new hope to families in places like Elkhart… We can watch as millions of new jobs with good pay and good benefits are created for American workers…” (Obama’s Energy Town Hall in Elkhart 2008).

Many of those at the town hall that day reported feeling hopeful that an Obama presidency would turn things around. Twenty-six year-old RV worker Alicia Egas explained that she would vote for Obama because she believed he could bring much-needed change. Worried for her job, family, and community, she observed that, in Elkhart, “We’ve never been this low…” (Steinhauer 2008a). Alicia’s sentiments were representative of an anxiety felt by millions of Americans desperate and overwhelmed in an erratic, savage, and suddenly incomprehensible economy.

ECONOMIC MELTDOWN AND RECESSION

The first signs of serious economic trouble emerged with the U.S. housing market downturn in mid 2006. Steady since 1991, the housing market had climbed to new heights between 2001 and 2006, thanks to a combination of factors, including policies encouraging home ownership, easily accessible and widely available credit, the introduction and subsequent bundling and trading of sub-prime mortgages (adjustable rate loans given to those with poor credit ratings), loosened trade regulations, and the increasing financialization of the U.S. economy. During these years, U.S. banking and financial operations realized extraordinary profits through actively purchasing, bundling, splitting, and trading packages of consumer and
housing debt. When the housing downturn caused real-estate values to plummet, billions of dollars in assets—mortgage-based securities and collateralized debt obligations—held by many of the largest and most powerful economic institutions in the world were suddenly worthless (Osenton 2009; Ritholtz and Task 2009; Sassen 2009; Sims 2009; Sorkin 2009).

More than a mere “market correction,” this abrupt evaporation of value sent the U.S. economy into a tailspin. Between March and early September, 2008, several of the largest investment banks, trading and brokerage firms, and mortgage companies in the world—including Bear Stearns, IndyMac, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac—declared bankruptcy, were purchased by other banks for pennies on the dollar, or were taken over by the U.S. government. The U.S. Federal Reserve responded to these failures in a variety of ways (lowering interest rates, loosening borrowing restrictions, guaranteeing assets, taking over firms) as a means to calm markets and prevent a full-blown economic crisis (Sorkin 2009). Though these efforts were successful in averting a total market collapse in the summer of 2008, government intervention could not stave off the economic reckoning to come.

The period of acute crisis began on Sunday, September 14, 2008, when it was confirmed that the fourth largest investment bank in the country—the 158 year-old Lehman Brothers—had failed. Unable to find a buyer willing to absorb its billions of now-worthless subprime and derivatives holdings, the company would file for protection in what would be the largest bankruptcy filing in U.S. history. Hours after this revelation, Bank of America announced it would purchase overleveraged investment giant Merrill Lynch for an amount that was less than half of what the firm had been valued at just a year earlier. By the close of trading the next day, the Dow Jones Industrial had plummeted 500 points, in its largest drop since 2001. On Tuesday, September 16, the U.S. Federal Reserve announced it would give insurance giant American
International Group (AIG) an $85 billion bailout and take an 80% stake in the company (Ritholtz and Task 2009; Sorkin 2009; Taibbi 2013).

The AIG news confirmed growing concern over the state of the increasingly prominent financial sector. This anxiety over and attention to financial markets—which accounted for 8.3% of U.S. GDP and approximately 23% of all U.S. domestic profits at the time (Sorkin 2009)—was well placed: As former Secretary of the Treasury Lawrence Summers once aptly noted, “Financial markets don’t just oil the wheels of economic growth; they are the wheels” (Murray 1997). In the days following the AIG shock, rumors of further bank failures and speculation about the value of financial institutions panicked Wall Street, and the stock market fluctuated wildly.

Unnerved and unwilling to part with capital in an unpredictable market, the surviving major banks stopped lending to each other, and the U.S. credit markets froze. This disappearance of credit—an indisputably necessary and critical component of all functioning economic systems—constituted the gravest threat to the American economy since Black Tuesday of 1929.

The financialization that had bolstered the U.S. economy for over two decades had been revealed to be an exploitative and fundamentally unsound system—a fiction that had become a normative and hugely influential practice in all parts of the economy. Over the course of a few extraordinary days, the decidedly real consequences of this fiction brought the world’s largest economy to its knees.

President Bush responded to these dramatic late-September events by convening an emergency meeting of economic advisors. The team, led by U.S. Secretary of the Treasury (and former CEO of Goldman Sachs) Henry Paulson and Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke, worked intensely to draft legislation that would halt the looming economic free-fall. On
September 20, the Bush administration’s economic team introduced The Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008. This three-page bill authorized Secretary Paulsen to purchase up to $700 billion in toxic assets from troubled banks and institutions. Architects of the plan maintained that assuming toxic financial assets would rescue the economy by enabling failing firms to clear their balance sheets, return to a healthy equilibrium, and resume lending. The taxpayer-funded Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP) would bankroll the purchases. As the sole manager of TARP, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury would use the multi-billion dollar fund to purchase financial assets as he saw fit (Sorkin 2009; Paulson 2013; Taibbi 2013).

Federal Reserve Chairman Bernanke and Secretary Paulson presented the bailout legislation to the Senate Banking Committee on September 23, 2008. Bernanke explained that the U.S. financial system was “very unpredictable, and very worrisome” (Landler and Myers 2008), and warned lawmakers that if they did not pass TARP legislation, there would be no economy left to repair (Mason 2009b; Ritholtz 2009). Highlighting the urgent need to address the escalating crisis, Paulson exhorted senators to “enact this bill quickly and cleanly, and avoid slowing it down…” (Landler and Myers 2008). Responses to Bernanke and Paulsen’s ominous warnings and dire predictions were angry and skeptical: Connecticut’s Senator Dodd called the bill “stunning and unprecedented in its scope and lack of detail” (Milne 2009:294), and several senators rejected Paulson’s assurances that the plan was not designed to benefit Wall Street, but was instead, “all about the taxpayers…” (Landler and Myers 2008). Jim Bunning, a Republican Senator from Kentucky, was angry that taxpayer money would be used to rescue firms that had made poor choices in the speculative financial market. Asserting that the plan would essentially, “take Wall Street’s pain and spread it to the taxpayer….” Bunning said the bill amounted to “…financial socialism” and described it as “un-American” (Landler and Myers 2008).
Many Americans shared Bunning’s perspective. National opinion polls taken at the time found an angry and anxious America: Deeply concerned by the state of the economy, the majority of Americans agreed that the federal government had no choice but to intervene in the market (Caplan 2008; Pew Research Center 2008; Treas 2010). At the same time, however, large portions of the country were outraged by the bailout proposal that they felt asked taxpayers to assume the costs incurred by a reckless Wall Street (Stelter 2008). Incensed that taxpayer money was to be used to rescue the very same banks that had foreclosed on the homes of working families unable to make their mortgage payments, many decried the legislation as blatantly hypocritical (Bensinger 2008; Caplan 2008). Outraged citizens took to talk radio and cable news programs and wrote letters to newspapers to protest that their money was being redistributed from those who found it difficult to stay financially afloat to those who had gambled and lost in a ‘casino capitalist’ system (Berton 2008; Collins 2008; Dwyer 2008; Norris 2008; Smith 2008; Stolberg 2008a; 2008b).

Rescue: “The sky would collapse if the banks weren’t rescued”

Good evening. This is an extraordinary period for America’s economy. We’ve seen triple-digit swings in the stock market. Major financial institutions have teetered on the edge of collapse, and some have failed … We’re in the midst of a serious financial crisis… (President Bush’s Speech 2008).

On the evening of September 24, 2008, President Bush took to the primetime airwaves to address the economic threat facing the nation. Warning that, “without immediate action… America could slip into a financial panic and a distressing scenario would unfold,” (President Bush’s Speech 2008), he urged congress to pass the bailout legislation currently being debated in the house and senate. The President acknowledged the public’s powerful opposition to the TARP plan, noting, “I’m a strong believer in free enterprise, so my natural instinct is to oppose government intervention. I believe that companies that make bad decisions should be allowed to
go out of business …” (President Bush’s Speech 2008). Explaining that he empathized with those who were angry, the President said, “I also understand the frustration of responsible Americans who pay their mortgages on time, file their tax returns every April 15, and are reluctant to pay the cost of the excesses on Wall Street …” (President Bush’s Speech 2008).

Continuing, “given the situation, not passing a bill now would cost these Americans much more later…” (President Bush’s Speech 2008), the President urged congress to pass the TARP legislation currently working its way through the house and senate. He emphasized that the nation’s entire economy was in peril, and that it was time do what was necessary to bring the system back from the brink of disaster. Bush explained that congress could address their doubts and differences once this acute crisis had passed—in time, they could consider updating the nation’s financial regulatory system while also ensuring “…that efforts to regulate Wall Street do not end up hampering our economy's ability to grow” (President Bush’s Speech 2008). Wrapping up his address, the president asserted that citizens should have should have faith in the economy because, “Despite corrections in the marketplace and instances of abuse, democratic capitalism is the best system ever devised” (President Bush’s Speech 2008).

Americans were far less certain of capitalism’s virtue: As the TARP legislation was debated in the waning days of September, hundreds of thousands of constituents called, emailed, wrote, and visited members of Congress to register their vehement opposition to the bill and exhort their representatives to vote against it (Bensinger 2008; Berton 2008; Norris 2008; Pew 2008). Thousands engaged in public demonstrations—dumping trash on the steps of Wall Street trading firms and on the lawns of C.E.O.’s homes, dressing up like zombie bankers, staging citizens’ arrests, marching on the capital—to protest what they identified as blatant theft (Mason 2009b). Several versions of the proposal were defeated in Congress as representatives—extra
sensitive to public sentiment in the run-up to the 2008 election—argued over the size, scope, and terms of the bailout (Grieder 2008; Herszenhorn, Hulse, and Stolberg 2008; Landler and Myers 2008). After days of debate filled with hearings, negotiations, closed meetings, and visits from White House officials, the house and senate finally reached an agreement. The final version of the legislation included tax relief, congressional earmarks, increased oversight and a multitude of other provisions (Bailout Bill 2008; Herszenhorn 2008; Mason 2009b; Barofsky 2013; Taibbi 2013).

Though many harbored doubts about the bailout legislation and all were aware a majority of the American public opposed it (Baker 2008; Bowman and Rugg 2010), lawmakers voted for the bailout bill because, as Senator Evan Bayh, the Democratic Senator from Indiana, explained, “we were told that the sky would collapse if the banks weren’t rescued” (Weigel 2010). The wildly unpopular Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008—the plan constructed by several of the most powerful economic figures on the planet and presented as the only possible way to save the U.S. from total economic collapse—was enacted and signed into law by President Bush on October 3, 2008.

By mid-October, the passage of the financial bailout plan had pushed the approval rating for Congress to an all-time low—lower, in fact, than the approval rating of President Bush, who’s standing with Americans was close to historic lows. Only 28% of Americans believed that the legislation would benefit people throughout the country, while over 60% believed that the legislation would benefit Wall Street and big investors (Norris 2008). It soon appeared that these suspicions were well founded. On October 13, less than two weeks after the bill’s enactment, Paulson announced a dramatic change in strategy: The plan to purchase $700 billion in troubled mortgages and assist homeowners by facilitating “loan modifications to prevent avoidable
foreclosures” (U.S. Congress 2008:121) would be abandoned. Instead, TARP funds would be used to purchase capital (at full price) in Wall Street firms, insurance companies, and financial institutions (Paulson 2013; Taibbi 2013).

The day after Paulson’s announcement, October 14, 2008, nine financial institutions (Citigroup, Wells Fargo, JPMorgan, Bank of America, Goldman Sachs, Morgan Stanley, State Street, Bank of New York Mellon, and Merrill Lynch) received an immediate cash infusion totaling $125 billion. Chosen because they were the nation’s largest financial institutions, these initial recipients were not required to undergo a formal evaluation (as mandated in the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act) before receiving TARP funds. Moreover, although the bailout was touted as the key to unfreezing credit and freeing banks to resume lending (and jump-start the economy), the bill included no lending requirements. As a result, rather than extending more credit, between October 2008 and January 2009, the banks who received TARP funds actually slowed down lending and moved more capital to the U.S. Federal Reserve, where it earned modest—but secure—interest. The already unpopular bailout became even less popular as it became evident that the U.S. government had no plans to realize the goals of helping underwater homeowners and stimulating lending (Andrews 2009; Mason 2009b).

The economy continued to decline throughout the final months of 2008, and when Americans took to the polls that November, it was clear that they were fed up with existing leadership and in search of change: Citing the economy as the primary concern influencing their choice, voters awarded Democrats with a clear victory—in addition to taking the presidency, the party gained seats in the Senate and House. As the year drew to a close, the Bush administration granted an emergency $17 billion bailout to U.S. automakers Chrysler, General Motors, and Ford. In December, the National Bureau of Economic Research confirmed what had been clear
to most Americans for quite some time: The U.S. had been in a recession since December 2007, and many economists pointed out that there was no end in sight (Isidore 2008).

On January 20, 2009, more than one million people gathered on the National Mall to witness Barack Obama take the oath of office and become the 44th President of the United States. In his inaugural address that wintry Tuesday afternoon, the new President discussed the serious economic challenges facing the nation, acknowledging that the U.S. economy “…is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age” (Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address 2009). Closing with a call for boldness in the face of hardship, Obama said, “America … in this winter of our hardship … with hope and virtue let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come…” (Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address 2009).

The faltering economy was the top priority on the new President’s agenda. In the months between his election and inauguration, Obama and his economic advisors had been working with Democratic leaders to draft a stimulus plan that would be ready to be presented to Congress immediately after he took office. A key part of his campaign for the presidency, the stimulus plan was intended to save and create jobs and spark economic growth via the investment of federal funds in alternative energy, education, health, infrastructure development and repair, and small business creation. As Congress opened debate on the proposed stimulus package in early February, the President took to the road to explain and promote the plan to the American public. His first stop: Indiana—a state he had just won (it was the first time in over forty years Indiana had gone Democratic) (Davies 2008)—and more specifically, Elkhart, Indiana, the “Unemployment Capital of America” (Goldman and Chen 2009; Hall 2009).
Town Hall on Economic Recovery: “Help this community recover”

Continuing his introduction of the President at the February 9, 2009 “Indiana Town Hall on Economic Recovery” in Elkhart, unemployed RV worker Ed Neufeldt described the economic suffering and growing desperation that had brought President Obama to Elkhart, explaining,

There are tens of thousands of people in Elkhart and throughout the country that have lost their jobs and have a story just like mine. Right now, with unemployment benefits, I am making ends meet. But what happens when my unemployment benefits run out? What will my family and I do? And others who are in the same situation as me? I am hoping, and praying, and believing that President Obama will put the people in Elkhart County and the country back to work (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009).

Audience members cheered and nodded with knowing agreement—many shared his feelings and worries. When their applause died down, Ed continued:

There are too many people in our community whose way of life is at risk. The stakes are high. We are looking to the leaders in Washington to get our economy moving and put the American people back to work again (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009).

As the crowd began to cheer again, Ed said, “Now, it is my privilege and honor to introduce to you the President of the United States, President Barack Obama.” As the two men traded spots on stage, Obama and Ed shook hands and as they briefly embraced the President exclaimed “You did great!” and Ed smiled and said “Thanks” (Turner 2009).

Taking the podium, President Obama thanked those in attendance and said “…have a seat, make yourselves comfortable, we’re gonna be here a while” (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009). Assuring the crowd that they had not been forgotten, he continued, “It is good to be back in Elkhart, and it is good to be back in Indiana” (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009). The President explained that the stories of Elkhart’s economic hardships were stories “I have carried with me every day since” (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009). He recounted, “I promised you back then that if elected President, I would do everything I could to help this community recover. And that's why I've come back today - to tell you how I intend to keep that
promise” (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009). After describing the economic stimulus and recovery plan being debated in Congress, President Obama asserted that his primary goal was “To put Americans back to work doing the work America needs to be done” (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009). Noting that Elkhart—and places like Elkhart—is key to recovery, he said:

Ed said it better than anybody could. He said, look, folks in Elkhart, they want to work. Nobody is looking for a handout. Everybody just wants to be able to get a job that supports a family. And we got the most productive workers on Earth. We've got the best workers right here in Elkhart -- who are willing to put hard time and do whatever it takes…And being here in Elkhart, I am more confident than ever that we will get where we need to be…I know people are struggling, but I also know that folks here are good workers and good neighbors who step up, who help each other out who make sacrifices when times are tough. I know that all folks here are asking for is a chance to work hard and to have that work translate into a decent life for you and your family (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009).

The President concluded his speech, opened the floor to questions, and spent the following two hours addressing community members’ queries and concerns. Wrapping up the town hall meeting with a declarative “God bless you. God bless America,” President Obama left the gym just as he had entered—to the sound of nearly two thousand Elkhart residents cheering “Obama, Obama!” and “We love you!” (Presidential Town Hall Meeting 2009).

Conservatives’ claims that the stimulus package was wasteful and did little for taxpayers didn’t gain traction with a nation still angry over the bailout legislation passed three months earlier. A majority of the public supported the stimulus because they believed that, unlike the bailout, it was intended to help average Americans rather than a small group of wealthy elites (Saad 2009). After passing a Congress divided sharply along party lines, President Obama signed the $787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into law on February 17, 2009 (Meckler 2009). The landmark legislation was not, of course, an instant economic cure, and the ongoing recession would continue to take a toll on workers, families, and communities across the country for months and years to come.
Wall Street Bonuses: “It’s about our fundamental values”

In March 2009—a month after President Obama’s visit to the community—unemployment in Elkhart hit 20.2%, more than double the national unemployment rate of 8.7% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009a). As one in five Elkhart workers hunted for a job that March, Americans learned that the bailed-out giant AIG had awarded $165 million in bonuses to a number of its employees (Andrews and Baker 2009). While TARP legislation mandated salary caps and other pay restrictions, because funds from the Fed’s bailout were distributed with virtually no strings attached, AIG had forged ahead in paying bonuses. Adding insult to injury, the bonuses had been awarded to employees of AIG Financial Products—the derivatives unit that had created the credit-default swaps that had essentially caused the financial crisis (Andrews and Baker 2009).

A few days after this news broke, the public learned that just one week after the Federal Reserve rescued AIG in September 2008, the company held a half-million dollar retreat at an all-inclusive desert resort where executives indulged in, among other things, $23,000 in spa treatments (Andrews and Baker 2009; Mason 2009b). The revelations sparked considerable public resentment: In addition to the 59% of the public “outraged” and the 23% “bothered” by these bonuses, three in four Americans wanted government to take action to recover the funds (Blendon and Benson 2009; Morales 2009; Nasiripour 2009). Hundreds of individuals protested outside of the homes of AIG executives, and thousands of others called, wrote, and emailed their representatives in Washington (Barron and Buettner 2009; Fenton and Kahn 2009; Fernandez 2009). Speaking to the media after news of the bonuses broke, an angry President Obama said:

This isn't just a matter of dollars and cents. It's about our fundamental values. All across the country, there are people who work hard and meet their responsibilities every day, without the benefit of government bailouts or multi-million dollar bonuses. And all they ask is that everyone, from Main Street to Wall Street to Washington, play by the same rules. That is an ethic we must demand (Obama Speaks on AIG 2009).
Congress quickly passed legislation mandating bonus and compensation restrictions and a 70% tax on bonuses at bailed out institutions (Cooper 2009; Taibbi 2013). This effort, however, proved somewhat futile: Banks found numerous ways around the restrictions (waivers, payments in stock, deferred compensation, etc.). In the following months and years, new revelations of bonuses and high compensation at bailed-out firms would emerge so often that they would eventually fail to make front-page headlines (Andrews 2009; Andrews and Baker 2009; Mason 2009b; Ritholtz and Task 2009).

GROUND ZERO OF THE GREAT RECESSION

While the recession left no part of the country untouched, it took a particularly devastating toll in some communities across the U.S.—communities like Elkhart, which, as one observer noted, “…is one of those "traditional manufacturing economies" - a phrase that used to imply stability, but is now code for economic disaster” (Whitford 2009). During the first year of the economic downturn, many of Elkhart’s RV manufacturers entered bankruptcy protection, shut down entirely, or were acquired and incorporated into larger operations. Surviving companies attempted to tough out the crisis by consolidating production. These manufacturers eliminated product lines, closed plants, reduced hours, eliminated thousands of positions, and cut employee benefits like health insurance and sick leave. Scores of additional jobs were lost when dozens of local RV-related enterprises (suppliers, dealers, repair shops) made cut backs or went out of business entirely. Thousands of workers found themselves dependent on community charities to feed their families, and long lines stretching in front of unemployment offices and food pantries became a common sight in the area (Brunker 2009).

Elkhart’s almost-daily plant closures and layoffs gave the area the grim distinction of having experienced the fastest, largest rise in unemployment in the country. This bleak statistic
made headlines before President Obama’s stimulus-launching town hall at Concord High in February 2009, and media focus intensified considerably following the event. In time, Elkhart became a symbol of the great recession. MSNBC engaged in a year-long series of features on the economic, personal, cultural, and political ramifications of the recession in the community, and several news organizations—including The Guardian, The New York Times, and The Washington Post—regularly filed reports on the economic conditions and developments in the region.

Describing Elkhart as “emblematic of Middle America in the throes of the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression” (Brunker 2009), observers used the community as a lens through which the lived realities of recession could be illustrated and understood. From its growing foreclosure, poverty, suicide and crime rates (Huffstutter 2009a; Jacobson 2009; Hattern 2010), to its many stimulus-funded projects and painfully slow recovery, Elkhart represented something of a portrait of the U.S. recession in miniature.

“The battle for America’s future will be fought and won in places like Elkhart”

On August 5, 2009, just six months after he introduced President Obama at the Concord High town hall, Ed Neufeldt was back in the plant where he had worked for 32 years. He and several hundred of his former co-workers were gathered in the main production area of Monaco Coach RV—or, rather, what used to be Monaco Coach RV. The building wasn’t humming with the sound of drills and saws, Ed wasn’t hard at work in the cabinet shop, and nobody was reviewing the day’s production or putting in overtime to finish a big order. There were no orders to fill, Monaco was not returning to Elkhart, and work was still incredibly hard to find (Calmes 2009). Though it had fallen since March, the local unemployment rate was still disastrously high at 16% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009b). A stage and rows of folding chairs bearing community leaders and 200 former Monaco employees filled what had once been final finish
area. Clad in business attire instead of their typical work wear—jeans, t-shirts, safety goggles, and work gloves—the workers chatted, took pictures of the numerous national media crews in attendance, and waited.

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause when a waving and smiling President Obama entered and took the stage. He had returned to Elkhart County to discuss economic recovery and deliver $39 million in stimulus funds to Navistar, a U.S. manufacturer of heavy trucks and commercial vehicles that now owned Monaco’s Elkhart facilities. Looking out at the audience filled with RV workers and local officials, Obama asserted, “The battle for America's future will be fought and won in places like Elkhart … by making [them] what they once were and can be again … centers of innovation, entrepreneurship … and opportunity; the bustling, whirring, humming engines of American prosperity” (Huffstutter 2009b). These words were met with loud applause and cheers from the audience. Elkhart is proud to be a place where people work hard and a place where they “make things” (Economic Development Corporation of Elkhart 2009; Elkhart County Horizon Project 2003).

The President continued by explaining that the stimulus legislation passed in February represented an “historic commitment to innovation…” because “…that’s what we do best in America—we turn ideas into inventions and inventions into industries” (President Obama Announces Recovery Grants 2009). Emphasizing his administration’s commitment to “planting the seeds of progress…and good-paying, private-sector jobs for the American people,” Obama said that he’d returned to Elkhart to announce $2.4 billion in competitive grants to develop battery technologies to make more fuel-efficient cars and trucks—battery technologies that would be “…made right here in the U.S. of A.” (President Obama Announces Recovery Grants 2009). He went on: “…Right here in Elkhart County, Navistar… will receive a $39 million grant
to build 400 advanced battery electric trucks … Just a few months ago, folks thought that these factories might be closed for good. But now they're coming back to life” (President Obama Announces Recovery Grants 2009). A single voice rose above the audience’s applause, shouting, “Thank you!!” the President replied, “You’re welcome!” and as the crowd laughed, he noted, “Thank the American people!” (President Obama Announces Recovery Grants 2009).

Detailing several other economy-bolstering measures he’d bring before Congress, President Obama then spoke about the complex and painful realities of struggling to get by. He gave voice to the understanding that joblessness is more than an economic challenge, explaining, “And there have been times where nearly one in five people in this area have been looking for work. You've seen factories close, and your sons and daughters move away in searches of jobs and opportunity. So this is more than an economic crisis. This goes to the heart and soul of a community. It tests the strength of families and the spirit of good people -- hardworking folks who’ve given their all to a company and now don't know where to turn” (President Obama Announces Recovery Grants 2009). Many in the audience nodded with understanding.

Touching on the public’s significant outrage and disappointment regarding the recent bank bailouts and revelations about executive bonuses, Obama acknowledged, “…it can be easy to lose hope, especially when you see a lot of folks out there who failed to meet their responsibilities — from Wall Street to Washington … when you've seen decades of broken promises …” (President Obama Announces Recovery Grants 2009). He urged Elkhart’s workers not to give up hope and promised that they would not be forgotten, concluding, “This is a chance to restore that spirit of optimism and opportunity which has always been central to our success … We've got to imagine … a brighter future for Elkhart…and for the United States of America” (President Obama Announces Recovery Grants 2009).
Enduring Economic Pain: “Not doing great”

For many, this “brighter future” remained a distant glimmer beyond the line of sight. Although the Great Recession technically ended in June 2009 when the U.S. economy expanded for the first time in 18 months, economic recovery was sluggish, uneven, and incomplete (DeParle and Gebeloff 2009). The extraordinary profits realized by major U.S. financial institutions and corporations since 2009 have not translated into significant recovery for most Americans. After peaking at 10.6% in January 2010, the national unemployment rate remained above 9.0% for two more years, and would not return to pre-crisis levels until December 2014 (Seefeldt, Graham and Abner 2013; Jacobson 2015).

Weak job growth and stagnant wages have continued to plague the labor market, and the numbers of underemployed workers and the long-term unemployed have remained at historically high levels. Though grim, many argue that this reality would have been far bleaker were it not for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The $787 billion in federal spending didn’t jumpstart the U.S. economy as many hoped it would. However, as President Obama explained, “Most economists - almost every economist - will tell you that had we not put [ARRA] in place we could've tipped into a great depression” (Khan 2012).

Although accurate, the “things could have been worse” argument is of little comfort to the millions for whom things have been—and continue to be—extremely tough. Making ends meet in the post-recessionary world continues to be a profound challenge for American workers. The U.S. real median annual household income fell 3.2% during the recession—from $55,309 in December 2007 to $53,518 in December 2009—and declined an additional 6.7% (from $53,518 in June 2009 to $49,909 in June 2011) after the recession had officially ended (Pear 2011). The U.S. poverty rate increased 27% between 2006 and 2010, when it climbed to 15.1%, the highest
rate since 1993 (Tavernise 2011; Seefeldt et al. 2013). During these years, bankruptcy filings in the U.S. rose from 600,000 (in 2006) to approximately 1.6 million by 2010, and over the same period, the percentage of Americans with delinquent mortgages payments more than doubled, and the number of mortgages in foreclosure more than tripled (Rosenberg 2010; Grusky, Western, and Wimer 2011; Smeeding 2012).

The post-recession years have been no easier in Elkhart, as the community struggled with high unemployment (above the national average for over five years), budget shortfalls, growing poverty, stagnant wages, and rising crime and suicide rates (Jacobson 2009; Markley 2009; Mason 2009b Shephard 2009). What’s more, the spotlight brought by President Obama’s visits turned the community into something of a touchstone: In the years following his visits, national and international media outlets routinely reported on local economic challenges and developments, and pundits and politicians used Elkhart to promote various agendas (Huetteman, Southall, and Smith 2013; Bloomberg News 2014). After “bottoming out” in 2009, the RV industry began to recover and local manufacturers added jobs, which led many pundits and reporters to observe that this was evidence that the U.S. economy was on the road to recovery (Dodge 2011; Popovich, Rogers, and Rushe 2012; Rushe and Rogers 2012; Schaper 2012). Though accurate, this conclusion is problematically incomplete.

Unemployment slowly, steadily declined in Elkhart and across the U.S., and millions of Americans—including Ed Neufeldt—returned to work. Five years after President Obama’s town hall meeting in Elkhart, Ed discussed his employment situation, reflecting, “Everybody asks, ‘How are you doing?’ I’ll say ‘I am living the dream,’ and they say ‘Why?’ Well five years ago I couldn’t even find a job and now I got three!” (Goldman 2014). Unable to find a job that paid as much as the one he lost (he made $20 an hour at Monaco), Ed was working seven days a week
delivering bread for a local bakery, stocking shelves at a grocery store, and cleaning a medical office. Together, these jobs constituted about 45 hours of work each week.

Ed’s story is not unique: Their unemployment benefits exhausted, a great many workers were left with little choice but to take any job on offer—including lower paying positions offering fewer hours and benefits that were less secure than their previous jobs. In Elkhart, RV manufacturers increasingly focused on doing more with less by expanding lean manufacturing processes and keeping labor costs down. As a result, Elkhart’s workers have found themselves in a new world of work—a disempowering, uncertain, and precarious world of employment that is shaping the experiences and livelihoods of more and more working people. Their lives profoundly altered by the upheaval of the 2008 financial crisis and its disastrous, transformative aftermath, millions of Americans now find themselves struggling to navigate a difficult labor market and employment context (Aleccia 2009). Though they may be employed, U.S. workers from Elkhart to Columbus to Boise, are, as Ed concluded, “…not doing great” (Willis 2011; Wilson 2010a; 2010b; Goldman 2014).

In the years since the crisis, the painful consequences of the recession have been heartbreakingly easy to spot. Still wrestling with the aftermath of the crash, many Americans do not have the luxury of relegating the disaster to the pages of the past (Pfeffer, Danzinger, and Schoeni 2013). Although the events of late 2008 have not been forgotten, it is difficult—thanks to time’s inherent, inevitable dulling effect on even the keenest of senses—to evoke the remarkable feeling that permeated the collective culture that autumn. In early September of 2008 it was still “…easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (Jameson 2003). By the end of that same month, things had changed significantly—dramatic
state intervention in the market had been the only thing standing between the largest, strongest economy the world has ever known and near-total collapse, and in just a few short weeks, the veil had fallen, the mask had been torn off, and the emperor stood naked (Isaac 2010; Rice and Bond 2013).

For the first time since the end of the Cold War, and only the second time in nearly a century, Americans were openly challenging the orthodox reverence of the unfettered free market as the pinnacle of economic perfection. The autumn of 2008 was a moment—extremely brief, conflict-filled, frightening, and chaotic, but significant, and shared—when the end of capitalism seemed slightly less improbable than the end of the world. Like most things that burn bright and hot, the intensity of this moment dissipated rapidly as 2008 became 2009 and the U.S. inaugurated a new president bearing promises of meaningful change. In the more many years since the financial crisis, the anger, disappointment, distrust, and uncertainty felt by many across the country may have grown less acute, but they have not, by any means, disappeared.

Over half a decade later, the old truism “the more things change, the more they stay the same” is remarkably resonant. While Americans are now more aware of—and upset by—inequality and the relationship between money and politics (a shift exemplified by the emergence of Occupy Wall Street in 2011) (Schram 2013), little else has changed. Things that, while not likely, seemed at least remotely possible in 2008—an economic or political paradigm shift, widespread resistance of neoliberal policies and practices—seem somewhat absurd today (Stiglitz, Tharoor, Shiller, Rogoff 2008). More telling is that even the less ambitious changes—significant banking reform, increased regulation of Wall Street, accountability for those responsible for the crash—seem like naïve and ridiculous wishes today. With the passage of time, this “moment” of ideological challenge—when millions of Americans suddenly recognized
a flaw in hegemonic understandings of the world and how it works—grows smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror of the collective culture, making it easy to ignore.

There are, indeed, good reasons to remember to forget that this moment even existed. Believers, after all, don’t enjoy crises of faith: Reformers become disheartened when momentum stalls, and many prominent historians have not been particularly adept at effectively analyzing the subtleties of ideology (though see Thompson 1964; Jones 1983). This moment should not be forgotten and its significance should not be dismissed: Acknowledging and examining the lived experiences of the collapse and its aftermath—the feelings, experiences, and thoughts of the working Americans struggling to navigate the most difficult economy they’ve ever witnessed—is of critical importance to understanding the seemingly impregnable neoliberal order and its consequences for individual lives and livelihoods in an increasingly precarious world.

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RECESSION: RESEARCHING ELKHART

Strategic Research Site: “Elkhart leads the way into recession and shows the way back out”

Elkhart provides a unique and particularly rich opportunity for understanding the lives, beliefs, experiences, and fates of U.S. manufacturing workers in the neoliberal era. In a country where people often ask “Why don’t we build things anymore?” the area has long served as a rebuttal. Settled by pioneers, it became a thriving industrial city in the late 19th century and has remained a manufacturing powerhouse ever since. Locals have designed and produced hundreds of products that have ended up in homes across the United States. From popcorn poppers and electronic switches to brass fittings and band instruments, the area has long been a manufacturing polestar. The region’s biggest and most profitable innovation—the recreational vehicle—has been the center of a large and growing industry since the 1960’s. Thanks to the RV
industry, this “Industrial Heartland” community has thrived as a manufacturing hub even as foreign competition rooted entire U.S. industries.

The region—a mixture of rural farmland, the cities of Elkhart, Goshen, and Nappanee, and the small towns of Bristol, Middlebury, Millersburg, and Wakarusa—is home to a population of 198,000. Predominantly white is (71.48% Caucasian, 5.1 percent African American, and 15.1 percent Hispanic/Latino), the area is a politically and economically conservative community that has gone red in every national election since Lyndon Johnson won Indiana in 1964 (Huffstutter 2009a). Pointing to their community’s ethic of hard work and culture of inventiveness, locals tend to be resistant to government intervention at every level and pride themselves on their community’s ability to pull itself out of hard times.

Perhaps most illustrative of the area’s economic conservatism is the simple fact that the RV industry, located just a few hours’ drive from both Detroit and Chicago—cities with strong and successful labor traditions that served as powerhouses in this country’s union movement—has neverunionized. Organized labor—even the specter of organized labor—has never been a factor in this community that boasts of its innovative spirit and strong work ethic. In fact, labor unions have long been an extremely unpopular idea in the region, and the RV industry’s leaders have never faced any serious organizing attempts. Taken together, the area’s anti-union atmosphere, dislike of government intervention, and overwhelming faith in the belief that individuals are, ultimately, completely responsible for their own fates make Elkhart, in many ways, a neoliberal ideal.

Though the region has undoubtedly suffered through economic downturns along with the larger U.S., its RV industry has repeatedly bounced back and Elkhart has remained a thriving industrial community—an identity that saw its greatest threat with the onset of the 2008
recession. The region’s economic suffering drew the attention of President Obama and countless commentators, who used the community as a lens through which the lived realities of recession could be illustrated and understood. When a journalist questioned President Obama’s repeated visits to the area, asking, “It’s fair to use Elkhart, as the president?” his reply was certain: “Absolutely. I think the Midwest generally has taken some of the biggest hits over the last decade and the question is, can we start reinventing ourselves so that we can make things that we are exporting and not just constantly importing stuff” (Obama: We Must ‘Help Elkhart Reinvent Itself’ 2009).

Arguing that Elkhart and its RV workers embody the strong work ethic, entrepreneurship, and responsibility that have made American great, the president and the national media used the community to tell the story of recession and hoped-for recovery. As the first dispatch from MSNBC’s *The Elkhart Project* noted, “Elkhart, the saying goes around town, leads the way into recession and then shows the way back out” (Brunker 2009). For better or worse, then, Elkhart, Indiana, became something of a metaphor for the millions of Americans struggling to stay afloat in the worst economy since the Great Depression (Mayeroewitz 2008; Why Elkhart? 2009; Khan and Fies 2011; Todd et al 2013).

Insight into the constructed meanings and daily practices used to understand and navigate this altered economic universe requires in-depth sociological research that goes beyond presidential events and media coverage to examine workers’ lived realities. The case of Elkhart offers an opportunity to build such understanding. A particularly rich example of economic disaster and neoliberal culture, the community and its workers are “strategic research materials,” defined by Merton (1987) as “empirical material that exhibits the phenomena to be explained or interpreted to such advantage and in such accessible form that it enables the fruitful investigation
of previously stubborn problems… (Merton 1987:10-11). The President’s and the national media’s strategic use of Elkhart’s recessionary struggle as a metaphor for American suffering and resilience make the community’s economic struggle a “strategic research event” (Merton 1987) that warrants deeper sociological inquiry. An empirical case that holds “…intrinsic interest … as a historical [event] on grounds of its relevance to values” (Merton 1987:14), the community’s economic decline is an event that has much to tell us about life in recessionary America.

Moreover, the understandings and realities of Elkhart’s RV workers also make the community a “strategic research site” (Merton 1987). Members of a community that boasts a “boot-strap” culture emphasizing individual responsibility, innovation, and hard work, local workers have long been reticent towards the very policies and approaches that might have prevented (or at least ameliorated) much of their economic suffering. An area where workers’ strongly-felt values align with the neoliberal ideologies and practices underlying the economic precarity they struggle against, Elkhart is a strategic research site that holds both “intrinsic interest as involving human values and instrumental interest … that may advance our general sociological knowledge” (Merton 1987:14) of the complex tangle of beliefs and behaviors inherent in the lived realities of neoliberalism.

**Research Questions**

Seeking to develop much-needed critical sociological insight into workers’ lived experiences of economic disaster and its aftermath, this research endeavors to build understanding of the ways that hegemonic neoliberalism—as ideology, policy, worldview, and relationship of power—inform individuals’ political and economic worldviews, their daily practices and expectations, and their navigation of a bleak economy. Informed by this admittedly
broad goal, this study addresses 1) Workers’ explanations of the causes and consequences of the recession, 2) Perspectives on state economic intervention, and, finally, 3) Neoliberal ideology and governmental power in workers’ lived experiences of recession.

First, this research seeks to elucidate understandings of the origins of the financial crisis and subsequent recession. In particular, how do Elkhart’s RV workers explain the financial crisis and subsequent recession? What do they believe are the causes of and the appropriate responses to the crisis and the long lasting economic suffering plaguing their community and the country as a whole? Second, this study explores feelings about the state’s proper economic role and the many actions it has taken in attempts to mitigate the fallout from the recession. More specifically, this study asks how do workers view the relationship between state and economy in a post-crisis world? What do they see as the appropriate role of the state in responding to economic turmoil? What are workers’ feelings regarding the actions taken by Washington (bailout, stimulus) and Wall Street (spending, bailouts) in the months and years following the meltdown? Finally, this research is concerned with ways in which neoliberal ideology and governmental power shape individuals’ daily lives and understandings. Does neoliberal ideology inform workers’ perspectives on economics, politics, and individuals? How do neoliberal ideology and its concomitant modality of governmental power manifest itself in workers’ daily lives, practices, beliefs, and responses to economic circumstances?

Research Significance and Implications

This study furnishes significant contributions to sociological knowledge in the areas of ideology, neoliberalism, and governmentality. My research updates classic sociological conceptions of the dominant ideology by bringing attention to neoliberal messages addresses a notable imbalance in the literature on neoliberal ideology, which has been largely focused on
elite and institutional message production. Neglecting to account for message recipients assumes passive and uniform acceptance of neoliberal ideology. My work addresses this weakness by exploring how individuals interpret, criticize, modify, accept and reject neoliberal ideology. In so doing, this work acknowledges the agency of working people and brings balance to existing conceptualizations of neoliberal ideology. This research also enhances existing understandings of governmentality. Prevailing governmentality scholarship is highly theoretical and deeply in need of the type of empirical grounding this project provides. Pushing beyond theory to explore governmentality in the lives of Elkhart workers, this research builds on efforts to bridge theory and practice.

Through an in-depth exploration of neoliberal ideological hegemony and governmentality, I hope to contribute a nuanced, authentic, and useful understanding of these forces and the manifold ways they shape and are shaped by individual experience. More generally, the goal of this research is to advance sociological thought and practice by sensitizing thinkers to the intersection of individual experiences and macroeconomic forces in an era of increasing precarity. In addition, by eliding determinism in favor of a theoretically grounded, empirical analysis of lived reality, this study represents a valuable addition to sociological knowledge. Exploring how workers live with, respond to, and survive crisis and its aftermath improves our understanding of the relationship between economic forces and experience, belief, and action. This knowledge is crucial to all who wish to make sense of social life in times shaped by extraordinary economic circumstances.

DISSENTATION OVERVIEW

This exploration of the lived experiences of Elkhart’s RV workers struggling to navigate the bleakest economy in a generation takes the following form:
• **Chapter Two - Researching Economic Crisis in Elkhart:** Opening with a consideration of the ascendance and nature of the neoliberal order, this chapter establishes the broader economic, social, and political context for my research in Elkhart. Following this, I present the theoretical framework that served to shape my research and analysis. This chapter concludes with an overview and discussion of my methodological approach and a description of my fieldwork and the interviews conducted in Elkhart.

• **Chapter Three - Entrepreneurial Heartland:** Introducing the community and the recreational vehicle industry, this chapter furnishes an overview of the core community values that define Elkhart. In addition to taking great pride in their enterprising heritage, workers say that core values of entrepreneurialism, individualism, and a strong work ethic make their community special.

• **Chapter Four - Entrepreneurial Workers, Enterprising Selves in “Good Times”:** Utilizing a Foucauldian frame, this chapter examines life and work during the RV industry boom years preceding the financial crisis. Workers navigating the pre-crisis labor market found their individualistic, entrepreneurial behavior resulted in empowerment and high wages that contributed to an environment of worker mobility and a focus on the present that, seemingly proved the ‘truth’ of neoliberal enterprise ideology. When the 2008 financial crisis brought these prosperous times to a crashing halt, workers found themselves questioning this ideology and entirely unprepared for the significant employment immobility and bleak future prospects that define the post-crisis “bad times.

• **Chapter Five - In Theory, in Reality – Neoliberal Ideology in Elkhart:** Exploring their thoughts on nature and functions of the individual, the economy, the state and the proper relationship between them, this chapter examines hegemonic ideology among Elkhart RV
workers. In their discussions, these workers reveal that the financial crisis significantly disrupted their worldviews and produced an ideological distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘reality’ that informs their views of desirable and necessary state and economic action. Though this ideological rupture has inspired a degree of populism among some, it has not resulted in delegitimation—a truth that is plainly evident in workers’ responses to the economic crisis.

- **Chapter Six - Navigating Crisis:** Examining RV workers’ experiences navigating a bleak labor market, this chapter finds that the entrepreneurial ethos that was so liberating during “good times” now inspires pressure and, ultimately, disempowerment. As a result, workers devote a great deal of time and energy to efforts that will make them more “employable” rather than seeking and demanding the significant structural changes or collective solutions that would more effectively combat precarity.

- **Chapter Seven - Neoliberal Governance:** Drawing the study to a close, this chapter discusses Elkhart workers’ enterprising ethos as a tool of neoliberal governance. A useful and powerful force for workers during the RV industry boom, this ethos has become a largely disempowering ideological commitment. Neoliberal power is an individualizing, depoliticizing, and, ultimately, appealing and productive form of power that cannot be effectively addressed without deeper, more accurate insight into the lived realities of neoliberalism.
CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCHING ECONOMIC CRISIS IN ELKHART

Following a brief overview of the nature and ascendant trajectory of the contemporary neoliberal order that establishes the broader social, political, and cultural context of the current study, this chapter turns to a discussion of the theoretical framework that informs my work. Rather than a comprehensive review of all the works used in the dissertation, this discussion briefly presents the theoretical framework informing this study and the analyses presented in later chapters, each of which delves deeper into the literatures relevant to the substantive topic being discussed. This chapter concludes with an overview and discussion of the methodological approach employed in my research and a description of the fieldwork and interviews conducted in Elkhart.

There can be no doubt that neoliberalism is a hegemonic force that has had an indelible influence on contemporary understandings and experiences. A product of historical realities and social arrangements, neoliberalism—like all hegemonic systems—is a complex bundle of logics, beliefs, orientations, and institutional, cultural, and individual practices that extends through all parts of society and profoundly shapes macro structures of power and individual perspectives and behaviors (Harvey 2005; 2007; Mudge 2008; Thorson 2010). My examination of the economic crisis in Elkhart—from the origins the financial meltdown and the economic circumstances shaping individuals’ feelings and choices to various manifestations of ideology and resistance—is specifically concerned with the nature and lived experiences of neoliberalism. Given this focus, it is imperative to have a basic understanding of the emergence, rise, and substance of neoliberal hegemony.
NEOLIBERAL HEGEMONY
The Emergence and Ascendance of Neoliberalism

According to de Tocqueville ([1840] 2003), U.S. democratic society is comprised of people who “owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands” (206). This emphasis on individual promise and value is imbued in U.S. democratic institutions and is part of the fabric of core American values. In his observation that the structure of American society and law celebrate the inherent value of the individual, sociologist Robin Williams (1951) pointed out that the U.S. constitutional protections of individual rights and limitations on state power were explicitly designed to preserve and promote the individual as central to the functioning of American democracy. While there’s little question that individualism is a core American cultural value, the prominence and meaning of this individualism has been interpreted differently throughout U.S. history (Bellah et al 1985). Perspectives on individuals, their value, and their rights and responsibilities have shifted significantly over time, particularly in economic thought. Understanding these shifts in perceptions of the individual are essential to examining U.S. politics and culture, the ways that Americans understand themselves and their lives, and the overarching economic order.

The U.S. constitution is premised on the existence of rational, worthy citizens. A democratic society is one in which men are free to pursue their destinies through entrepreneurship, service, and work. At the country’s inception, unruly individual interests were not framed as a serious problem—indeed, an imposing state was understood to be the biggest threat to individual freedom and general social order (Micklethwait and Woolridge 2004). Because the specter of monarchy and aristocracy loomed large for the framers of the U.S.
constitution, they despised oppressive forms of rule that subverted individual possibilities and interests and emphasized the importance of limiting state power. Inspired by the works of Locke, Hobbes, and Smith, U.S. law and custom established negative freedoms – *freedom from* domination, government regulation and control (Berlin 1969). Businesses and individuals were not heavily regulated, capital expansion was left to the economic realm, and the state was not expected (or welcome) to intervene in the economy. This classical liberal philosophy of individual freedom was hegemonic in political and economic thought and policy from the nation’s founding through the 1930’s.

When unregulated speculation in capital markets brought the U.S. stock market to a standstill in 1929, shared popular perceptions of individuals, state power, and freedom shifted significantly. The Great Depression and subsequent 20% unemployment seriously challenged the dominant political economic order the definition of individual freedom as positive freedom—the *freedom to have* food, security, and a dignified life—became normative in U.S. cultural and political discourse and thought (Piven and Cloward 1971; Reinhart and Rogoff 2009). The core value of individualism endured, of course, but in a different form: The idea that individual rights could only exist in the absence of state power fell by the wayside, and state protection and assistance were defined as guarantors of individual value and liberty. Heavily influenced by Keynes’s coupling of freedom and state action and advocacy for deficit spending to spur demand, the U.S. federal government launched massive public works projects with the goal of full employment.

Though many debate the effectiveness of President Roosevelt’s policies in ending the Great Depression, it is undeniable that his primary vision was one of demand-side economics (Harvey 2005). The emergence and growth of the welfare state from the 1930’s through the late
1960’s extended the Keynesian understanding of the state as a vital economic player, responsible for creating and nourishing the contexts that produce employment and stable incomes for working people via market intervention and regulation. Politicians’ and policymakers’ adoption of this perspective and use of the state to improve and secure the welfare of citizens was a notable and explicit rejection of the classical liberal conceptualization of freedom. Rather than an instrument of oppression, state intervention was understood to be a guarantor of positive freedom—the freedom to work, to earn a wage, and to have the dignity of self-sufficiency.

The protection of individual rights and freedoms that required market regulation investment in state social welfare programs resulted in powerful labor unions, rising wages, and the growth of the American middle class (Harvey 2005). In this period of “embedded liberalism,” “…market processes and entrepreneurial and corporate activities were surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment” (Harvey 2005:11). The federal government’s market regulation, careful management of monetary policy, and provision for basic welfare led to a post-war domestic peace unrivaled anywhere in the world, and the idea of the state as responsible for citizens’ welfare was an understanding so normative that it simply was simply seen as ‘common sense.’

This understanding, however, would not endure. The next shift would not be caused by a bang akin to the Great Depression, but, rather, a deep and protracted whimper. Identifying the economic stagnation and spiraling inflation plaguing the nation in 1970’s as consequences of state economic actions, Milton Friedman and a number of other vociferous ‘outsider’ economists pushed to end the welfare state and move to a decentralized, privatized economy. Noting that the state is a force that limits economic growth and curtails personal freedom, the leaders of this intellectual movement argued that markets are only prosperous, free, and just when they are free
of oppressive state intervention and regulation. Tracing the roots of their approach to the classical liberal tradition so influential in the early days of the U.S. republic, these economists drew upon the Hobbesian vision of humans as self-interested beings that can only be free in the absence of coercion from government and other people (Hayek 1976; 1979). As post-war prosperity failed and U.S. leaders looked for a solution to restore economic growth, these ideas gained influence in the halls of power: Keynesian policies and embedded liberalism were understood to be economic and ideological failures, and the understanding of negative freedom as the true definition of individual freedom was once again hegemonic among U.S. leaders and policymakers.

Rejecting embedded liberalism and turning away from the welfare state (a form of political rule deemed ineffective and inherently un-free), this return to liberalism—*neoliberalism*—conceptualizes freedom and capitalism as inseparable. Neoliberal logic holds that individuals are only truly free when they are allowed to compete without restriction in the free market. From this understanding, then, comes the neoliberal policy emphasis on marketization: From deregulation and the privatization of goods and services once provided by the state to the elimination of entitlement programs and the dismantling of labor unions, neoliberal state policy is structured by an impetus to eliminate all barriers to the free market, which is understood to be the best means of structuring all aspects of human social life. It is hardly surprising that the neoliberal worldview is powerfully resonant in the U.S.: A society characterized by core cultural values of individualism, freedom, and achievement and success, the U.S. is, in many ways, neoliberalism’s “spiritual home,” or, at the very least, an ideal place in which to implement neoliberal practices.
In his first inaugural address, U.S. President Ronald Reagan (1981) gave voice to the neoliberal understanding that would soon dramatically re-shape American society, noting, “It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government” (Ronald Reagan: Inaugural Address). An effective neoliberal cultural warrior, President Reagan effectively equated capitalism with freedom and communism with slavery and repeatedly emphasized the understanding of free market capitalism as natural, fair, free, and the best economic system possible. Reagan’s message—the core tenet of neoliberal thought—became a hegemonic cultural understanding over the next four decades as more and more Americans agreed that markets are ‘natural’ and even ‘patriotic,’ and that state-led or collective efforts are essentially everything that the U.S. is not—authoritarian, unnatural, and un-free.

The influence of Milton Friedman and other neoliberal voices continued to grow throughout the Reagan administration, and, by the end of the 1980’s, their neoliberal approach had successfully sidelined the Keynesian economics that had defined U.S. policy for over 50 years (Crouch 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1999; Gamble 2001; Harvey 2005). Despite some political differences (and, in the case of Clinton and Obama, different party affiliations), U.S. presidents since Reagan have adopted the neoliberal perspective—essentially a “the government that governs least governs best” approach—on economic governance. Neoliberal economists have held and continue to occupy positions of power in all presidential administrations, and, beginning with Paul Volcker as the Chair of the Federal Reserve, each successive chair has worked very hard to implement and continue monetization as the primary mission of the Fed. Neoliberal goals of dismantling the liberal welfare state and freeing the market from state interference have been at the heart of innumerable political and legislative efforts that have been
fought for and realized (to varying degrees) over the last 30-40 years. Presidents Reagan, G. Bush, Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama have continued and/or extended neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization, monetarism, anti-unionism, and tax cuts to different degrees of commitment and success (Aalbers 2013; Panitch and Gindin 2014).

On paper, the past four decades may be read as a neoliberal brag sheet: The dissolution of the USSR and the fall of the Berlin Wall prompted observers to declare that history was over – that capitalism (of the neoliberal variety) had triumphed (Fukuyama 1992; Friedman 1999). Moreover, inflation has been held in check since the 1980’s (Harvey 2005; 2007) and cuts in social spending and a concerted effort to eliminate collectivities (which are, according to neoliberals, inherently un-free), have resulted in “the end of welfare as we know it” and significantly diminished labor union power (Clayton and Poutusson 1998; Zylan and Soule 2000; Zuberi 2006; Jacobs and Myers 2014). In addition to the deregulation of the airline, communications, and mortgage industries, the passage of NAFTA, and the repeal of the Glass Steagall Act (Prasad 2006; Kotz 2009a; 2009b), other neoliberal victories have included the privatization of prisons and military operations (Leander 2005; Welch and Turner 2008; Jing 2010), and the largest tax cut in U.S. history for the wealthiest Americans (Hacker and Pierson 2005). The long period of (relative) peace and prosperity in the U.S. since the mid 1990’s has reified the understanding that neoliberalism furnishes freedom, wealth, opportunity, and success. For the most part, then, neoliberalism has been largely unquestioned and unquestionable for over forty years. Indeed, in an inversion of what President Nixon famously lamented about Keynesianism, it could be argued that in the U.S., “We are all neoliberals now” (The Economy: We are all Keynesians Now).
In reality, neoliberalism has not delivered on its promises of a social utopia of growth, widespread prosperity and a flourishing entrepreneurial middle. In truth, U.S. economic growth and real wages have stagnated (Goldin and Margo 1992; Bradley and Stephens 2007), inequality has skyrocketed (Piketty and Saez 2003), the political system has become in thrall to a small handful of massive corporations (Bartels 2008; Johnson 2008; Hacker and Pierson 2010) and middle and working class American lives are increasingly characterized by risk, fewer social protections, and heavy debt burdens, growing stress, and, for some groups, declining health (Piketty and Saez 2003; Hacker 2006; Kalleberg 2008, 2011; Frank, Levine, and Djik 2010; Zuberi 2006). Moreover, neoliberal policies were at the heart of the 2008 financial crisis, and as such, may have produced the ultimate undoing of neoliberal hegemony.

The 2008 crisis and subsequent recession have been the biggest challenge to neoliberalism to date. The “hands off” approach to regulating trade that resulted in the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression became untenable when the U.S. economy required a federal rescue—the $700 billion Troubled Assets Relief Program was, according to neoliberal economists and political leaders alike, the only way to save the U.S. economy and preserve the welfare of individual Americans. In the early days of the financial crisis, a number of observers speculated that high unemployment, painful recession, and rising levels of fear, insecurity, and anger would bring neoliberal capitalism to a major turning point: Just as the Great Depression had ushered in a new era, the thinking went, the financial crisis would usher in an unknown permutation (or, possibly, but doubtfully, the end) of capitalism.

Initially, growing public concern over income inequality, the election of a new president who promised to “get tough” on corporate power and to increase federal economic oversight, and the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement appeared to portend a significant cultural
shift. For the first time in decades, according to many, it seemed possible that the back of neoliberal hegemony had finally been broken. In the years since the economic crisis, however, it has become clear that these observations were somewhat naïve: Capitalism is intact, markets remain untethered, and the bundle of political, cultural, economic, and relational elements that idealize markets as the best means for organizing human life continue to shape cultural narratives, policies, institutions, and individuals’ lives and understandings (Harvey 2005; 2007; 2009; Mudge 2008; Dean 2009).

**Neoliberal Logic**

The classical liberal emphasis on individual freedom and deep distrust of state power are key to neoliberal thought. Neoliberal logic, however, is distinct from classical liberal thought in that it defines humans as inherently economic creatures. As naturally avaricious, competitive, and entrepreneurial beings, humans are meant to live and thrive in a market society where they rationally maximize their interests through work, exchange, and enterprise. Given this understanding, then, neoliberal thought defines human liberty as economic freedom. According influential neoliberal Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek, economic freedom is more essential to liberty than democracy because, as economic beings, humans are only able to realize their interests and live naturally under the conditions of pure market sovereignty.

There are a number of assertions and assumptions about the economy, society, the state, and individuals embedded in the neoliberal conceptualization of freedom. To begin, this perspective views the free capitalist market as a true mirror of human nature: Neoliberals argue that markets, like humans, are competitive, rational, and primarily motivated by the efficient maximization of interests. Because free markets operate according to the natural principles that inform human nature, they are the best are the best means for structuring human society (Friedman 1962; 1980; Friedman and Jacobson Schwartz 1971; Hayek 1991; Rothbard 2004). As
such, the state is tasked with encouraging and nurturing free markets. Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises (1985) explains, “the task of the state consists solely and exclusively in guaranteeing the protection of life, health, liberty, and private property against violent attacks. Everything that goes beyond this is an evil” (52). Overt state economic interventions are viewed as illiberal, immoral, and harmful violations of freedom that undermine healthy markets and stifle growth. The state should be minimal—or, at the very least, drastically smaller and less powerful—and should not take action beyond what is necessary to protect citizens and property and ensure economic competition (Mises 1962; 1985; Nozick 1974; Hayek 1979; Friedman 1980).

According to neoliberal thought, states have no responsibility for ensuring anything beyond equality in the marketplace. Though unfortunate, inequality is not morally unacceptable. It is, rather, a natural and unavoidable outcome of freely made individual decisions in a free market society (Nozick 1974; Hayek 1976). Hayek ([1944] 2014) explains,

> There will always exist inequalities which appear unjust to those who suffer them, disappointments which will appear unmerited, and strokes of misfortune which those hit have not deserved … Inequality is undoubtedly more easily borne, and affects the dignity of the person much less, if it is determined by impersonal forces than when it is due to design (135).

Individuals, then, don’t have a “right” to a sustainable income and the state has no duty to take steps to create more equal economic outcomes for people. Rather, rights and equality are conceptualized as market-based phenomena: All individuals are essentially equal in their right to access and compete in the marketplace. Good (successful) individuals are those who accept the risk inherent in free exchange and function competently in markets. Entrepreneurial in spirit, these are people who take risks, work hard, and adapt to the changes and requirements of the free market. When their choices don’t result in success, they accept responsibility for failure and do not seek reparations through state intervention or regulation, as doing so would make them little
different from weak ideologues with as much regard for freedom as totalitarians (Mises 1962; Dean 2008).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In exploring Elkhart RV workers’ explanations of the causes and consequences of the greatest economic crisis in a generation and thoughts on the proper relationship between state and economy, it is necessary to examine existing treatments of ideology and the many ways it shapes individuals’ thoughts and perspectives. To understand workers’ efforts to navigate recession it is particularly useful to draw upon Foucauldian perspectives on the manifold ways that governmental power operates in framing individuals’ daily practices and, ultimately, their lived experiences of recession.

Neoliberal Ideology: The Gramscian Approach

Marx is, of course, a seemingly natural place to begin a study of manufacturing workers struggling to navigate the most significant crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression. Using a Marxist critical approach to examine workers during a period of economic crisis is virtually a basic sociological reflex—nearly as instinctive as breathing. Hyperbole aside, Marx’s approach is useful for understanding crucial aspects of work and life in contemporary capitalism. In fact, one of Marx’s earliest questions—the question of what keeps humanity from understanding “the meaning of its own struggle and its own desires?” (Marx and Engels 1972:12)—inspired the current study: When thinking of the thousands of workers in Elkhart filing for unemployment benefits and searching for work while, at the same time, the biggest banks in the U.S. received billions of taxpayer dollars, I wondered what Marx might make of it all. How would he explain how capitalism had reached the current crisis? How would he explain why workers are so unwilling to challenge the system responsible for their ever-growing precarity? It turns out to be
a neat bit of symmetry that reflecting on Marx was the origin of the research questions animating this study, as Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches are especially useful for illuminating the origin and growth of the neoliberal order at the heart of the crisis.

Inverting Hegel’s understanding of the economy as derived from human self-interest and rationality, Marx argues that ‘human rationality,’ ‘self-interest,’ and, indeed, human consciousness itself, are products of the material relations in society. The material practices of the economic base of society produce particular political, social, and cultural institutions. These institutions, their related ideologies and discourses, and, importantly, the ways that humans understand their struggles and desires, are elements of the superstructure. Noting, “It is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production … and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out,” (Marx [1859] 2009:53) Marx argues that the crucial realm in which men “fight it out” is determined by the relations of production in the economic base. He explains,

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society – the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness (Marx [1859] 2009:11-12).

Alive to the ways that economic relations shape how humans see and explain their worlds and themselves, Marx’s political economy radically transformed existing understandings of culture and consciousness—for better and for worse. In his recognition that “men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.” (Marx and Engels [1932] 1971:47), he was not blind to individual agency. However, in focusing on—and privileging—the economic base, Marx and orthodox materialists’ failure to grapple with culture and consciousness in a nuanced way have resulted in
approaches nearly as simplistic as Hegel’s idealism. Confident that a sufficient crisis of
capitalism, combined with the alienation inherent in the capitalist mode of production would
produce oppositional consciousness, this materialist perspective essentially dismisses cultural,
political, and social processes and understandings as mere ‘superstructural’ phenomena.

Seeking a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between economics, culture,
and human consciousness, neo-Marxist perspectives reject the strict materialism that assumes
politics, ideology, and culture are merely reflections of the material base of society. Antonio
Gramsci agrees that ideology is the means by which those in power maintain their dominance
and protect their interests. Because democratic governance requires consent rather than coercion,
the endurance of capitalism in democratic societies hinges on individuals’ acceptance of
capitalist moral, political, and cultural values. Gramsci (1971) notes that ideologies are a
“historical necessity” (377) in that they effectively organize human understandings and
explanations of the social order and their position in it. Ultimately, then, useful knowledge of
social structure and individual experiences and understandings requires the in-depth exploration
of hegemonic ideology.

In saving Marx’s conceptualization of ideology from its problematic materialist
determinism, Gramsci’s nuanced take on the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the
economic base and the broader social order furnishes a useful means for analyzing how cultural
formations function to perpetuate a social order amenable to capitalism. Using this critical
approach to examine the emergence and nature of neoliberal hegemony in the U.S. reveals a
complex relationship between economics and civil society. In many ways, neoliberal and U.S.
values appear to be cut from identical cloth, as the market fundamentalism that is the bedrock of
the neoliberal worldview mirrors many core U.S. cultural values. Closer examination utilizing a
Gramscian approach to power and ideology reveals that this “natural” fit is, in fact, the result of shifting cultural definitions of and approaches to freedom and individualism—shifting definitions and understandings directly linked to the needs of capitalist accumulation.

The Gramscian approach reveals the broad strokes of reciprocity between capitalist accumulative imperatives and cultural understandings that have made neoliberalism hegemonic today. This perspective is, however, is extremely limited in its ability to guide us in teasing out the how—How does neoliberalism shape lives, livelihoods, and understandings? How are individual subjectivities and experiences related to the endurance of neoliberal hegemony?

It’s not surprising that orthodox Marxist and early labor-process (e.g. Braverman 1974) perspectives primarily concerned with the objective features of the relations of production offer few answers. However, although the more recent approaches that are alive to the necessity of considering culture (Burawoy 1979; Willis 1981; Hochschild 1983; Smith 1990; Peck 1996; Peck and Theodore 2000) furnish useful insight into the complexities of ideological hegemony, these works also come up short in a number of ways. In fact, this body of scholarship suffers from a sort of paradox: Its biggest strength—the Gramscian approach that acknowledges ideology as it operates ‘on the ground’—is also a significant obstacle that limits its usefulness for analyzing manifestations of neoliberalism. By accounting for civil social life and recognizing that powerful groups rarely impose values through direct force, this literature gets at the subtle ways that culture produces and perpetuates ideologies that naturalize exploitation and inequality (Seider 1974; Crouch 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001; Ayers 2005; Speigel 2006; Van Arsdale 2008). However, because these works largely focus on the institutional side of the equation, the bulk of the existing sociological treatments of hegemonic neoliberalism fail to
examine how individuals receive, interpret, and resist dominant ideology and are thus unable to account for the complex and varied nature of neoliberal power.

Agent-centered analyses utilizing Gramscian understandings of ideology in examining the ways neoliberalism is interpreted, lived, and resisted through daily choices and experiences could greatly improve existing understanding of the lived experiences of neoliberalism. An agent-centered approach offers a more complex, useful, and authentic understanding of neoliberal thought and the manifold ways it shapes lives (Foucault 1980; Vallas 1991; Mumby 1997; Danaher, Schirato and Webb 2000; Gunn 2006; Ong 2006; Boltanski and Chiapello 2007; Greenhouse 2009; Vallas and Hill 2012; Daldal 2014; Lasslett 2014; Vallas and Cummins 2015). While there exists a significant social psychological literature that examines individuals’ ideological worldviews in relation to social structure (Huber and Form 1973; Alves and Rossi 1978; Kluegel and Smith 1981, 1986; Bobo 1991; Gilens 1999; Hunt 2003), to date, the bulk of these analyses fail to distinguish contemporary neoliberal ideologies and neoliberal forms of power. For such an understanding of neoliberal power—a diffuse, often highly individualized, and generative form that operates through the micro mechanisms of everyday interactions, thoughts, practices, and subjectivities—it is useful to turn to Michel Foucault’s work on neoliberal power and practice.

Neoliberal Governmentality: The Foucauldian Approach

It is, perhaps, somewhat surprising to turn to Foucault—well known for his desire to “dispense with the subject,” (Foucault 1980:117)—for an explication of subject-centered reason and individual practices and processes. In the final years of his life, however, Foucault’s abiding interest in the construction and exercise of power took the form of an examination of autonomous individuals and, particularly, the “processes by which the individual acts upon
himself” (Foucault 1993:203). More specifically, he was interested in examining the nature of contemporary forms of knowledge and power produced by civil and social institutions and practices that function to create and shape self-constituting individuals and cultures of individualization, auto-initiative, and action (Paras 2006; Rose, O’Malley, and Valverde 2006; Downing 2008). Outlining the questions animating his final work, Foucault (1991) explains, “My problem is to see how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth” (79). In his final series of lectures at the College de France (1977-1981), he takes up the matter of governmentality—the political rationality or “mode of thought” that is the foundation of governance, which he defines as “…activity that consists in governing people’s conduct within the framework of, and using the instruments of, a state” (Foucault 2010:318).

For Foucault (2010) governmentality is a “…particular type of discourse and a set of practices that, on the one hand, constitutes these practices as a set bound together by an intelligible connection and, on the other hand, legislates and can legislate on these practices in terms of true and false” (18). As modes of thought insinuated in “every facet of life” (Lemke 2002:50), governmentalities effectively structure human social reality. They formulate individuals’ discourses and understandings, specify appropriate thought and conduct, identify social problems and ‘rational’ solutions, and, ultimately, constitute specific forms of power, and, importantly, legitimate the exercise of said power. Governmentalities function as regimes of truth that determine and shape the “mechanisms and procedures intended to conduct men, to direct their conduct, to conduct their conduct” (Foucault 2014:12). Using this conceptualization to track governmentalities and their resultant modes of governance over time, Foucault establishes the genealogy of the specific phenomenon of interest—the emergence, evolution, and nature of neoliberal governmentality and techniques of governance.
Classical Liberal Governmentality

Founded upon the ‘truths’ and principles of political economy, classical liberalism defines humans as *homo economicus*—fundamentally economic beings. This perspective conceptualizes humans as free, rational, self-interested, and naturally market-oriented beings that are best able to pursue their interests by means of free market exchange (Protevi 2009; Read 2009; Foucault 2010). As a natural reflection of fundamental human instinct and desire, then, the free market is understood to be the ideal means of organizing human social life and providing for social needs and benefits (Protevi 2009). Markets, like men, are self-regulating and function best when granted the maximum amount of liberty possible. Classical liberals see economic measures taken by the state (e.g. regulation, intervention) as violations of human liberty akin to state curtailment of individual expression and choice (Read 2009). When not distorted by the influence and power of the (inherently political and illiberal) state, the free market will efficiently and optimally provide for social benefits. Thus, general social health depends on the limitation of state power in favor of economic freedom and the primacy of the market. As such, markets should be largely unregulated and free to function naturally. In essence, “… the classical liberal formula is “protect the market from government in order to allow social benefits from natural exchange” (Protevi 2009:29).

Classical liberal governmentality inheres a laissez faire approach to economic exchange and, in turn, a fundamental distrust of political action and state power. Foucault (2010) explains that this approach is “…imbued with the principle “One always governs too much”—or at least, one should always suspect that one governs too much” (319). Always skeptical of state power, this perspective defines most state action (particularly economic action) as an unnatural incursion of individual human liberty. The classical liberal understanding of the proper role and
functioning of the state holds that it exists to secure and protect freedoms—nothing more, nothing less. In essence, the state is charged with little more than defending the citizenry against violence, enforcing private property rights, and upholding laws that protect individual freedoms (expression, assembly, petition, religious practice). An inestimably powerful influence that has shaped societies across the globe, classical liberal thought has had a particularly profound role in U.S. political culture and practice. Recognizing that the country was founded on classical liberal principles and that the American approach to economic and political action is rooted in classical liberal governmentality, Foucault (2010) explains, “liberalism in America is a whole way of being and thinking” (218).

**Neoliberal Governmentality**

Though informed by a number of classical liberal principles and values, neoliberal governmentality constitutes a significant departure from classical liberal governmental thought and practice. Asserting “neo-liberalism is not Adam Smith; neo-liberalism is not market society,” (Foucault 2008:131) Foucault explains that neoliberal thought breaks from classical liberalism in its definitions of and prescriptions for market, man, and state. While neo- and classical-liberalism both take “political economy as [their] major form of knowledge” (Foucault 2007:108), neo- and classical- liberal governmentalties entail the exercise of fundamentally different forms of power, utilize different techniques of governance, and target different populations (Foucault 2007). These perspectives share the understanding that humans—and markets—are inherently economic, rational, and free, and both agree that, given this symmetry, the market is the ideal means for ordering all of human social life (Hayek 1976; 1979; Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Hay 2004, Fourcade and Healy 2007; Foucault 2010; 2011).

Neoliberalism, however, rejects the classical liberal vision of the free market as a
naturally occurring, relatively uniform, and profoundly sturdy mechanism of exchange that is immune to—and, when totally free, largely determinative of—social and political forms. Pointing to the great upheavals of world wars, global recessions, cultural movements, and diverse economic orders in various nations, neoliberals argue that the market is not a natural structure that exists outside of political and cultural contexts. Rather, like all social institutions, it is a variable, somewhat fragile construction whose functionality is entirely determined by political, social, and cultural context (Foucault 2008). While the market is imperative to human freedom, because it is not an inevitable outcome of human social life, the state is responsible creating markets and taking actions to nurture the conditions necessary to optimize market functioning (Protevi 2009; Foucault 2010).

Unlike the classical liberal prescription for states to take a “hands off” approach to the economy, neoliberal governmentality mandates that states engage in ceaseless—indirect—economic activity. Although it shares the classical liberal contention that the state should never directly intervene in the operation of market mechanisms, neoliberal thought maintains that the state is responsible for intervening throughout social, cultural, and political realms to create and expand markets and produce the social conditions and contexts that nourish and support market functioning (Hayek 2007; Foucault 2010). Neoliberals define direct state intervention (e.g. market regulation, the breaking up monopolies, income redistribution) as intolerable overreaches of power (and thus violations of freedom), neoliberal thought defines a host of indirect state economic interventions (privatization, labor control, political reforms) as acceptable—and, moreover, as absolutely necessary. Foucault (2008) explains, “neoliberalism should not therefore be identified with laissez-faire, but rather with permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention” (132).
Neoliberal governmentality holds that states can best and most effectively facilitate the creation of markets and nourish their functioning by taking actions to shape the most crucial element of economic exchange—the individual. Markets are inherently flexible, risky, competitive, reproductive, self-disciplining, and autonomous social forms, and require participants that embody these same characteristics. This perspective defines humans as fundamentally economic and entrepreneurial beings. Foucault (2007) notes that neoliberalism is premised on the understanding of humans as *homo economicus*—inherently economic and entrepreneurial beings constantly seeking to maximize their interests through exchange. According to this logic, all individuals engage in a lifelong enterprise consisting of discovering, making, and improving the self (duGay 1996). In essence, contemporary lives are largely concerned with investing in and developing their human capital, as individuals consider themselves as ‘works in progress’ (Rose 1992; Fenwick 2002b; McNay 2009). Modern lives are self-enterprises that must be constantly worked on and developed. Just as business entrepreneurs engage in ceaseless activity to develop their ventures, entrepreneurs of the self perpetually work to develop and refine personal qualities (Garrick and Usher 2000; Jones and Spicer 2005). The enterprise of the self is an endeavor centered on building “responsibility, discipline, diligence, and so forth” (Rose 1992:144)—capacities that will enable one to survive and thrive in the marketplace and will, in turn, create thriving markets.

Neoliberal logic recognizes that, like all economic ventures, individual enterprises must be inspired, developed, and nurtured. Ultimately, then, developing entrepreneurial individuals that embrace the characteristics of the marketplace is the primary task of neoliberal governance—the state must use its power to shape individuals into the flexible, risk taking, reproductive, self-disciplining, and autonomous entrepreneurs that free markets require. Aimed
at fostering enterprising selves, neoliberal governmentality consists of “the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of a very specific, albeit very complex, power,” (Foucault 2007:108-109) meant to fulfill the goal of creating autonomous, entrepreneurial individuals. Unlike classical liberal governmental power’s concern with and realization through discipline, neoliberal governmental power is centered on and manifest through \textit{life itself}—it is a form of power enacted through neoliberal governance that Foucault (2007) terms ‘biopower.’

Rather than the ‘docile bodies’ that are the desired outcome of classical liberal disciplinary power, neoliberal biopower seeks to produce reproductive, self-regulating, autonomous subjects. Articulated through social and civil institutions, practices, interactions, and norms, biopower shapes individuals’ cognitions, practices, and identities. Just as disciplinary power relied on training (in school, military, factory, etc.) for its realization, biopower power relies on “institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics” (Foucault 2007:108-109) that foster and manage individual enterprise and produce competitive, self-regulating, entrepreneurial, market subjects. Neoliberal states no longer engage in direct physical violence or oppression (as the sovereign form of power requires), nor do they use overt, repressive means of behavioral modification and control (as disciplinary power requires). Instead, “the functioning of power becomes less invested in regulating behavior through panoptic, institutionally based training exercises, and more invested in directly targeting life and lifestyles – inside and outside the factory, the army, or the school, those recognizable sites of disciplinary power” (Nealon 2008: 47). In place of earlier governmental focuses on and practices of overt dominance, neoliberal governmentality is concerned with the ‘conduct of conduct,’ or “the power to act on the actions of others” (Christie 2006).
Instead of directly intervening in individuals’ lives, the neoliberal state takes a multitude of actions throughout the social fabric to create the conditions necessary for the articulation of biopower. For example, rather than the institutional monitoring of social welfare recipients (a disciplinary practice), the neoliberal state’s elimination of such programs effectively pushes individuals into a risky, uncertain marketplace that requires they engage in entrepreneurial behavior (negotiating for higher wages, investing in human capital, changing spending habits) for survival. In addition to creating/expanding a market, the state’s elimination of social welfare effectively works to socialize individuals to regulate themselves. The marketization and the entrepreneurial behaviors and life changes necessitated by such state action is an example of the indirect ‘governing at a distance’ that defines biopower.

It is important to note that biopower is a form of positive power—rather than control through repression or deprivation, neoliberal governance constitutes control through invention (Fraser 2003). Neoliberal governmentality, in contrast, consists of regulation from a distance and centers creative action, self-direction and individual responsibility. The shift from disciplinary society to biopolitical society inheres a shift from repression to creation, and a shift from (never completely) centralized locations of power to diffuse, micro, and self-producing locations of power (McNay 1994; Nealon 2007; Binkley 2009). As repressive and centralized forms of power, sovereign and disciplinary governmentalities commonly inspire significant resistance and furnish a central location of power (the state) as the target of opposition. The creative and diffuse nature of neoliberalism, in contrast, make biopower much harder to oppose, as it is a challenge to justify resistance to improvement, and moreover, extremely difficult to revolt against the self.

While existing theoretical treatments of neoliberal political, ideological, and social formations are compelling, it is imperative to understand “actually existing neoliberalism”
— the complex and dynamic ways that competition, governance, and biopower are lived as everyday experiences. The lived reality of neoliberalism is constituted in the ways workers think about, act, and engage with social structures and with each other. As Foucault (2007) astutely notes, the contemporary regime is not determined by macrostructures of dominance, but, rather, exists in the daily microphysics of power manifest in thought, routine, and actors’ goals and perspectives and must be studied as such. He explains,

The problem of bringing labor back into the field of economic analysis … is how the person who works uses the means available to him. … What system of choice and rationality does the activity of work conform to? … So we adopt the point of view of the worker and, for the first time, ensure that the worker is not present in the economic analysis as an object—the object of supply and demand in the form of labor power—but as an active economic subject (Foucault 2007:227).

Ultimately, neoliberalism is both thought and individual practice and can be usefully understood through centering the point of view of the worker as an active economic subject engaged in ceaseless enterprise.

Drawing upon Gramscian understandings of ideology, this study utilizes an agent-centered approach to understand workers’ lived experiences of ‘actually existing neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore 2002). In examining the relationship between hegemonic neoliberalism and workers’ political and economic worldviews, daily practices, expectations, and strategies for navigating economic crisis, my research seeks to, as Foucault says, “deal with” the lived experiences of homo economicus in an age of neoliberal precarity and change.

**RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

I performed research in Elkhart County, Indiana, over the course of six months in 2009 and 2010. While the recession deeply affected every sector of the economy, the manufacturing sector was particularly damaged (Whitford 2009). My project drew from the population living and/or working in the Elkhart region. The research population consisted of adults who had been
or were currently laid off from work in RV manufacturing and who worked or lived in Elkhart County. I chose to focus on those over the age of 18 because these individuals are most seriously affected by economic and political changes. My research explored the anger, apathy, legitimation, and lived experiences of those living and working in manufacturing in Elkhart. My exploratory, qualitative research sought to gain a deep and authentic understanding of the embedded nature of neoliberalism in the lives of workers in this community.

A Qualitative Approach

I chose to use qualitative methods for my exploration of Elkhart’s experience of and response to the economic crisis, as they furnish the most useful means of understanding the social realities of individuals and groups. While similar research conducted in different contexts informed preliminary expectations about potential data, my research questions didn’t present hypotheses and therefore didn’t lend themselves to quantitative work. Indeed, the lived experiences of economic crisis are best understood through a flexible, sensitive research that goes beyond the broad brushstrokes of official indicators and quantitative measures (Sandelowski 2000). Because the attitudes, beliefs, and meanings created by individuals are too complex to be measured by discrete variables, I chose to employ a qualitative approach in conducting this research. As the best means of examining “things in their natural settings [and] attempt [] to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln 2005:3), qualitative research methods allow for insight into the stuff of daily lived experience—the very things that my research questions address.

Interested in understanding workers’ experiences of navigating recession, I sought to uncover the rich and subjective nature of lived realities, to “learn from the participants in a setting … the way they experience it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what
they experience...” (Morse and Richards 2002:28). I chose qualitative methods as the best means of getting closer to understanding what was happening on the ground beyond presidential media events and news headlines (Sandelowski 2000). In addition to seeking insight into community members’ day-to-day experiences, I also sought to understand Elkhart’s RV workers’ relationship with the practices, ideologies, and modes of power inherent to the hegemonic neoliberal order. Burawoy’s (2000) observation that “theories...are the theories of privileged men who appear in privileged airspace above the world they theorize ... they cannot hide the unspoken, unreflected, stratospheric situatedness of their knowledges” (340) is a useful description of the bulk of existing research on neoliberalism. Of the numerous theories and studies of neoliberal order, few actually examine how working Americans interpret and respond to the dominant economic ideologies and developments in their daily understandings and practices. Such an examination requires on-the-ground engagement that explores “the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power” (Kinchelow and McLaren 2008:421) as viewed through workers’ eyes—research only possible via a qualitative approach. Ultimately, then, I chose to employ a qualitative approach because my research questions required it (Morse and Richards 2002).

Because qualitative data making is not a single approach (Morse and Richards 2002; Creswell 2007), I incorporated a variety of methods in order to best understand the lived experiences of economic crisis. Acting as a methodological bricoleur, I utilized a variety of methodological strategies as needed during the course of my fieldwork (Levi-Strauss 1966; Denzin and Lincoln 1998; 2005). In performing bricolage, I worked to become “adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks, ranging from interviewing to observing, to interpreting personal and historical documents, to intensive self-reflection and introspection...”
(Denzin and Lincoln 2005:2). As the research progressed and new questions surfaced, I found myself turning to a variety of methodological techniques that allowed me to address those questions. From in-depth interviews to observation and participant observation, I used the methods best suited to my research goals. This multi-method approach allowed for the emergence of insight into the dynamic and influential phenomena shaping the social realities of Elkhart’s RV workers. In addition to conducting in-depth interviews with RV workers, I also engaged in a number of other activities, including observation, participant observation, and informal and in-depth interviews with locals in order to acknowledge and explore “the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power” (Kinchelow and McLaren 2008:421).

Fieldwork in Elkhart

Having graduated from high school in a county neighboring Elkhart County, I had several friends and family members in the area and was somewhat familiar with the community. Building upon my existing connections and familiarity, I decided to return to the area and live in the community while conducting what would be the bulk of my research—in-depth interviews with RV workers. My schedule and commitments did not allow for an extended period of fieldwork (a year or more) that would enable me to truly become embedded in the community as an ethnographer would (Berg 2004). Qualitative data making is not a single approach, however, and often greatly benefits from a variety of strategies (Morse and Richards 2002; Creswell 2007). As such, my choice to live in the area was a way of supplementing interviews with workers with observations, participant observation, and informal interviews in order to build understanding of day-to-day realities and community routines in Elkhart. While living in Elkhart for three months during the summers of 2009 and 2010 and conducting interviews with
unemployed RV workers, I engaged in participant observation with a local non-profit group and observations at a variety of community meetings and events. In addition, I also interviewed a number of other locals who offered valuable insights into what was happening in the community.

Upon arriving in Elkhart in 2009, I reached out to “Working Together,” local non-profit group composed of un- and under-employed people in the community. This group works together to provide support and services for other unemployed people in the area. In addition to initiating various projects (shared gardens, reading rooms, job-coaching sessions) throughout the region, Working Together has a central headquarters where it holds planning meetings, support groups, and general social and networking activities. After explaining my project and research goals to the director of the group, he met with other members of the organization and asked if they would be willing to grant me access to their space. The group unanimously and generously invited me to spend as much time in the meeting space as necessary, and to attend support groups, coordinator meetings, and other activities.

During the summers of 2009 and 2010, I participated in a weekly Working Together support meeting where locals talked about the tough job market and their unemployment experiences. I also took part in many of the group’s activities (various brainstorming sessions, organizing meetings, and pot-lucks) as well as observed other, larger events. In most of my time with Working Together, I took the role of participant-observer by interacting with group members, building connections, and assisting with activities. Although all members of the organization were aware of my role as researcher and warmly welcomed my participation, it was very important to me that my presence was as unobtrusive as possible so as not to disrupt from the dynamics of the group.

While listening and sharing during weekly support meetings and at other smaller events, I
did not take written field notes, conduct formal interviews, or record conversations or because I felt doing so would detract from the shared intimacy of the setting. Upon returning home after each event, I wrote up my observations and thoughts on what had taken place, being sure to use pseudonyms for fellow group members in respecting their right to confidentiality. At larger group-sponsored events open to the broader community—including a session focused on training individuals to manage personal finances and several job-interview motivational coaching sessions—I took the role of observational researcher. At these crowded events where attendees were encouraged to take notes, my note taking did not distinguish me from any other attendee. Because it would have been impractical to announce my research role and obtain consent from all who might appear in my data through observation or informal interaction, all names are kept confidential.

Although none of the regular members of Working Together had worked in RV’s (they were largely white-collar workers who had been laid off from a variety of occupations (consulting, journalism, state agencies)), talking and working with these individuals gave me vital insight into the many challenges faced by unemployed Elkhart residents and the broader community dialogue related to the crisis and proposed solutions to the ongoing recession. Moreover, in addition to pointing my attention to relevant local news, meetings, and events, a number of the people I met at Working Together connected me with their friends and family members who had been laid off from RV work, enabling me to grow my sample of interview subjects. My participant observation experiences with this organization proved to be an invaluable resource that immeasurably aided my understanding of recessionary Elkhart.

I also engaged in a number of other observations while Elkhart during 2009 and 2010. My time in the region produced several opportunities to observe a number of community
gatherings (music festivals, art walks, the Elkhart County 4-H fair), meetings, rallies, and forums. In the summer of 2009, I observed a fiery “HealthCare Town Hall” meeting during which locals asked questions about and registered their thoughts on the recently passed Affordable Care Act as well as a Purdue University-sponsored “Regional Innovations During Boom and Bust Conference” emphasizing the importance of entrepreneurship. That summer I also attended several local political rallies in support of various local level candidates, a gun-rights rally, and a small number of anti-Obama protests sponsored by the local tea party group. In addition to again observing several similar protests and rallies when I returned to Elkhart the following year, I spent time observing and talking with people waiting to greet President Obama when he returned to Elkhart to present stimulus money that August.

In observing these local happenings, I identified myself and briefly described my research if it came up in conversation with the people I spoke with—something that happened on a handful of occasions—but, for the most part, simply spoke with those around me about the event we were attending. More often than not, these brief conversations inevitably turned to broader discussion of the recession and Elkhart’s unemployment pains, which I noted in my notes each night. I did not seek formal consent to make conversation at these community events because doing so would have certainly cast a problematic pall on the interaction and would most likely have created more discomfort than necessary. As such, the identities of those I spoke with during these observations remain confidential. My observation at public events proved useful for helping me gain better understanding of the rhetoric and beliefs circulating in the local community (Hughes 1971; Maxwell 1992).

Finally, my fieldwork also included interviews with a number of community members not directly associated with the RV industry. In many instances, friends, family members, and
fellow members of Working Together put me in touch with community members that they believed could provide useful information about unemployment in Elkhart. In these cases, I called or emailed the potential interviewees to tell them about my research, ask if they’d be willing to talk with me and provide them with an informed consent form. Conducted either over the telephone or in a local coffee shop, these interviews covered a wide range of topics related to the ongoing recession and the community’s response. In addition to speaking with a librarian whose Saturday mornings were spent helping workers file for unemployment electronically at the library and train to get their GEDs. I interviewed three local journalists who have worked in and reported on Elkhart for many years, a retired director of a non-profit junior achievement program that taught entrepreneurial values in local high schools, and two small-business owners who had lost their businesses due to the recession. While not explicitly related to my pressing research interest in the experiences of RV workers, these unstructured interviews furnished important insight into Elkhart’s culture, history, and broader community dynamics.

In-Depth, Focused Interviews

The bulk of this research consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with Elkhart-area RV workers during the summers of 2009 and 2010. Given the exploratory nature of the inquiry, interviews were chosen as the best means of approaching my research questions. In-depth interviews allow for a rich understanding of constructed meanings and perceptions. Though the method suffers from the disadvantages of producing data that is not generalizable to a larger population, it allows for a more intimate view of the economic recession than any other method. No other method could as effectively get at the explanations, attributions, and meaning constructions created by members of the community under study. Giving me the opportunity to “seek out and capture the authentic human voice” (Merton, Lowenthal, and Kendall 1990:xii),
interviews allow for in-depth exploration of the feelings, thoughts, and ideas of participants without enforcing an unnatural or obtrusive research design.

The choice to focus on the thoughts and experiences of RV workers was a somewhat obvious one—after all, it was the plight of the RV industry that drew national media attention, and the president and other prominent figures used unemployed RV workers as a sort of “face” of the meltdown and its lasting pain. The population for these interviews consisted of adult RV workers (over the age of 18) who had experienced a lay-off or job-loss during the economic slowdown that began in mid-2008. Although the absence of a sampling frame made probability sampling impossible, this was not a significant problem because generalizability was not one of my primary research goals. As such, I utilized the non-probability methods of snowball, opportunistic, and judgment sampling.

Upon entering the field in 2009, I asked friends and family members in the area to put me in touch with laid-off RV workers who might be willing to talk with me. Though none of my established contacts worked in RV’s, all had friends who had (not a surprise, given size and centrality of the industry), and these connections resulted in eight interviews. Due to my familiarity with the community, I knew that employees and ex-employees at local factories tend to stay in touch and are often friends and neighbors. Capitalizing on the intensity and strength of these local networks, I employed snowball sampling by asking each of the workers I interviewed to suggest others like them who might be willing to talk with me. This snowball approach yielded an additional nine interviews, and members of Working Together connected me with three additional laid-off workers, bringing the total number of interviews conducted in 2009 to twenty. Although beginning several snowballs as different points had yielded a significantly varied sample, as I coded and analyzed these interviews, it became clear that my research had not
reached saturation (Morse and Richards 2002). The data from this first round of research raised further questions, and I determined that I would need to return to the field and expand my sample in order to resolve ambiguities and capture a fuller range of experiences (Schofield 2002).

Having fully tapped my social networks the previous summer, I returned to Elkhart in 2010 with a different sampling strategy. After receiving permission from establishment owners and managers, I hung flyers calling for interview participants in a number of public places around Elkhart, including Laundromats, banks, restaurants, libraries, and pharmacies. These flyers noted that interviewees would receive a $25 for their participation—this incentive was made possible through a small research grant awarded by the Northeastern Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Recruitment flyers were exceptionally effective and produced a total of 31 completed interviews with RV workers. I built upon this convenience sampling method by asking interview subjects to connect me with fellow RV workers who might be willing to participate in research. Snowball sampling in this way resulted in another 14 successfully completed interviews, bringing the total sample size to 65.

The age of participants ranged from 19 to 69, with an average age of 39. Of the 18 women and 47 men interviewed, nearly half (32) were in their 30’s or 40’s. In addition to speaking with one 19 year old and a handful of workers in their 20’s, I also interviewed 17 workers over the age of 50 and 7 in their 60’s. The number of years each individual had worked in the industry ranged from half a year to over 42 years, with an average of 17 years in RV’s. Educational attainment in this sample population varied significantly. Of the 65, 17 workers had not finished high school, 35 had earned a high school diploma or GED, 9 had some college education, and 4 had earned a college degree.
Participants were given the option of being interviewed over the phone or in person at a public place of their choosing. Of the 65 interviews conducted, 13 were done by telephone and the 52 took place in a public setting located in Elkhart (most commonly a local coffee shop). The interviews, all of which were recorded and later transcribed, ranged in length from just over forty minutes to two hours, with an average length of approximately an hour and a half. Interviews followed a semi-structured, focused format guided by my overarching research questions (Merton 1987; Merton, Lowenthal and Kendall 1990). I used an interview schedule (Appendix A) to guide interviews, but did not adhere to it stringently, as I wanted the semi-structured nature of the interaction to allow participants to expand upon the things they felt were especially important (Rubin and Rubin 2005).

Data Analysis

Unlike quantitative analysis, qualitative work is not narrowly prescribed and involves a significant amount of analytic freedom. Indeed, “qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation ... the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when – and if – arrived at” (Patton 2002:432). The data produced by my research was analyzed through an iterative, reflexive process that began as the data was collected. I employed a grounded theory approach in this research: Rather than working deductively to find evidence in support of a hypothesis or apply a theory to a new area of knowledge, my inductive approach sought to explore general lived phenomena. General exploratory questions informed the direction of the research, which I continually considered and reconsidered throughout my fieldwork (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). I engaged in theoretical sampling by developing knowledge about my subject by keeping the channel between data gathering and theorizing open (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Creating
analytical notes and categories while in the field, I theoretically sampled data as I moved forward, making sure to use my notes to seek out the resources and information that would address the questions and contradictions that arose during the first round of research in 2009. This process of analysis has the advantage of letting the data lead the theory rather than imposing stringent theoretical hypotheses on the data. Thus, I practiced progressive focusing by engaging the data and continually refining my analytic focus (Schutt 2006).

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and entered into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software program. Following a grounded theory approach, I coded transcribed interviews and field notes were by subject, theme, and analytical theoretical category. I then grouped data into larger ‘code categories’ in Dedoose. Emergent themes determined the organization of findings into several chapters. Embedding myself in the data, I wrote up each findings chapter based upon the directions the data took me, generating theory and analytical conclusions grounded in and led by data (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). It is my hope that this back-and-forth between data and theory has enabled me to produce understandings that are “closely related to the daily realities (what is actually going on) of substantive areas and [thus] highly applicable to dealing with them” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:238-239).

Ethical Concerns

Nearly all research projects involving interaction with human subjects are subject to ethical concerns. The most salient ethical issues related to this research were informed consent, data management, confidentiality, and protecting subjects from discomfort when talking about emotionally trying topics. During the course of my research, I worked to respect the dignity and privacy of my research subjects. The Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB)
approved my research protocol as having set forth efforts to ensure the privacy, care, and dignity 
of human subjects involved in the project. In addition, I am also bound by and have adhered to 
the Professional Code of Ethics and Scientific Standards set forth by the American Sociological 
Association (ASA). Following the requirements of the IRB and the ASA professional codes of 
ethics, I established a variety of efforts to protect the welfare and honor the dignity of all 
research participants.

In conducting participant observation with Working Together, I distributed informed 
consent forms to all members of the organization and answered their questions about my 
research. I did not record any conversations or other interactions while working here and all 
group members were given a pseudonym for the purpose of observational field note summaries.

For interviews (with RV workers and other community members), I explained my 
research purpose and gave participants an unsigned informed consent form that outlined their 
rights and listed my contact information as well as the contact information of the Northeastern 
University Institutional Review Board that had approved my research (Appendix B). Telephone 
interviews began with my reading the informed consent form and asking subjects if they had any 
questions or concerns, and offering to mail or email them a copy of the informed consent form. 
For both the in-person and telephone interviews, I informed participants that the interviews were 
being recorded and assured them that I would be the only person to listen to these recordings and 
that their names and identities would remain confidential. I then asked permission to begin 
recording and conducting the interview, and all respondents agreed and completed interviews 
without objecting or raising concerns.

All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder (for telephone interviews I used a 
microphone earpiece attached to the recorder) and recordings were assigned a number and
pseudonym. I transcribed all interviews and destroyed audio recordings once transcription was completed. To maintain confidentiality, I was the only person with access to interview transcripts, and subjects and all those observed were assigned pseudonyms that were used in data collection, entry, and analysis. All field notes and transcriptions were stored on a password-protected computer that only I am able to access. I expunged all possible identifiers or links to identification (including the mailing addresses of subjects interviewed by telephone—gathered in order to mail participants the promised $25 incentive) from the data.

Aware that talking about poor economic conditions and unemployment could be upsetting or uncomfortable for individuals, I took efforts to mitigate this form of harm and minimize discomfort. At the start of each discussion, I emphasized that discussions were entirely voluntary and that interview participants could refuse to answer any question, or could terminate the interview at will. In addition, I used carefully worded questions designed to elicit responses without causing any psychological discomfort (Appendix A). Finally, I compiled a list of community resources that participants could consult for additional support and counseling should they be upset. Though it was offered at the close of each interview, none of those I spoke with were interested in this information.

Research subjects interviewed during the summer of 2009 received no direct benefit such as payment or other financial benefit from their involvement in this research. Those interviewed in 2010 received a $25 VISA gift card incentive as a thank you for their participation. Participants in the latter group were told that they would receive the incentive no matter how long/short the interview went so as not to place pressure on their answers. Gift cards were distributed in-person and mailed to participants who were interviewed by telephone.
Potential benefits of this research to others include a better understanding of the ways in which economic hardships affect the lives, attitudes, and beliefs of individuals. In addition, I have agreed to make all publications and the final product of the research available to any participant who requests these materials. Though the research has few lasting direct benefits for subjects, increased understanding will add to a body of knowledge that serves to illuminate the realities of a group that is often overlooked and unheard. This understanding can increase individuals’ understandings of their communities and themselves.

Limitations

Perhaps the most commonly cited weakness of qualitative methods is a lack of generalizability (Schofield 2002). Because researchers focus on gathering a large amount of data from a small sample rather than a small amount of data from a large sample, their conclusions are usually limited to those they have studied. My research suffers from this same pitfall. Because I conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of a specific community at a specific point in time without randomly sampling subjects, my findings cannot be applied beyond a very limited setting and my research cannot be replicated. These limitations are not problematic, however, as the true goal of this study is less focused on generalizability and more on validity.

As Denzin (1983) notes, “the interpretivist rejects generalization as a goal and never aims to draw randomly selected samples of human experience...Every instance of social interaction ... represents a slice from the life world that is the proper subject matter for interpretive inquiry (135). Indeed, this research is meant to understand economic crisis as those experiencing it understand it – in a deeply interpretive way. Thus, in conducting qualitative research, I have focused on the subjective elements of the social world. The goal of this research is to maximize
validity and authenticity – to construct understandings of economic crisis that actually reflect lived realities.

The best way to achieve validity is through rigorous research. I took several steps to achieve rigor. First, in choosing the appropriate method, I ensured rigor, as “rigorous research is research that applies the appropriate tools to meet the stated objectives of the investigation” (Ryan 2005:29). A qualitative approach was the most appropriate method for the stated research objective of uncovering meaning. I also enhanced rigor by going into the field armed with knowledge of the common pitfalls of qualitative methods in order to avoid them. In a similar vein, I entered the field with a comprehensive knowledge of the literature on the subject under investigation. Though this literature informed my research, I worked to reduce bias by striving to acknowledge and bracket my expectations and existing understandings. Bracketing made me better be able to be a clear instrument less biased by previous work (Morse and Richards 2002).

I worked to ensure rigor by conducting a sufficient number and variety of interviews in order to ensure that I was not encountering phenomena unreflective of the lived realities of Elkhart’s RV workers. My extended commitment to fieldwork and interviews normalized the field and thus helped me see it in a way closer to the way participants see it. Moreover, spending six months in the field over two years and engaging in a wide variety of methods enabled me to reach saturation. I left the field and stopped interviews when I determined that my research had ceased to reveal new and relevant information (Morse and Richards 2002).

The most important way to ensure rigor is through enhanced reflexivity. Because qualitative work is so interpretive, it is impossible to take the researcher out of the work. This fact means that qualitative work such as mine runs the risk of biased and unreflective of any reality other than my own (Creswell 2007). To build reflexivity, before each interview and
observation experience, I wrote a note reflecting on my current mood, insights, and emerging ideas (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). These reflexive research notes made it possible for me to bracket my feelings, biases ideas in order to minimize their interference with research objectivity. Though bias will always be a limitation in social scientific research, it is possible to diminish its influence through rigorously reflexive methods—some of the researcher’s strongest resources for producing valid, meaningful, and useful qualitative understanding.
CHAPTER THREE: ENTREPRENEURIAL HEARTLAND

Towards the end of his remarks on the economy delivered to a factory floor full of unemployed workers in Elkhart in August 2009, President Obama touched on the values that define the community:

We know that even in the hardest times, against the toughest odds, we have never surrendered. We don't give up. We don't surrender our fates to chance. We have always endured. We have worked hard, and we have fought for our future. Our parents had to fight for their future; our grandparents had to fight for their future. That's the tradition of America. This country wasn't built just by griping and complaining. It was built by hard work and taking risks. And that's what we have to do today (Remarks By the President on the Economy in Wakarusa, IN).

The President’s emphasis on hard work and risk-taking couldn’t be more fitting for Elkhart: A community often labeled the “Entrepreneurial Heartland” of America, Elkhart prides itself on what residents and local politicians identify as the region’s unique enterprising spirit capable of overcoming any obstacle. To be sure, the region’s world-renowned RV industry has long rewarded hard work and ingenuity with prosperity. It is fitting that the RV, a quintessential symbol of freedom and adventure, hails from a place that cherishes and defines itself by the synonymous values individualism and entrepreneurialism. Locals are proud of their strong work ethic, fierce independence, and robust entrepreneurial spirit. Like the President, they see these traits as key to Elkhart’s past success and crucial for its future prosperity. Pervasive individualism and entrepreneurialism have molded workers’ identities and the community’s culture, politics, and business environment. The values embodied by the RV are central to Elkhart’s lifeworld and the industry has powerfully shaped community culture and norms. As the region’s largest employer and economic lifeblood, the RV industry wields great influence in determining local conditions and prospects. Beyond determining livelihoods, the RV industry has had a significant role in fashioning the content and character of workers’ daily lives and understandings.
This brief chapter furnishes a view of the Elkhart community. Following a description of Elkhart, its entrepreneurial heritage, and its relationship with the recreational vehicle, I examine the core values embedded in the community and its primary industry. RV workers say that Elkhart is a place built on a foundation of faith and family, and their descriptions are woven together by shared pride in entrepreneurialism, independence, and hard work—values they say are the heart of their community.

THE ELKHART COMMUNITY

Elkhart, Indiana: “A city with a strong heart”

It is said that the region’s first inhabitants, the Native North American Potowami and Miami tribes, chose the name Elkhart because the island in the river that flows through the area is shaped like the silhouette of an elk’s heart. Indeed, the community has been described as “unlike any place on earth, a city with a strong heart” (Wenger 2002:1). When asked how she views her home, Nancy, a local who works with the community and has lived in the region for 37 years, says, “Probably the first word that comes to mind is family-oriented, very friendly.” Others agree, pointing out that they like Elkhart because “People know each other … if there is a tragedy, we come together to be there for each other” (Elkhart County Horizon Project 2009). This friendly, caring community is the heart of Elkhart, and local events and traditions nurture this atmosphere. For two weeks each July, the Elkhart County 4-H Fair attracts nearly 300,000 visitors. Offering tractor pulls, grandstand entertainment, a parade, and a talent competition, locals point to the fair as the major event in the life of the community. Garage sales are ubiquitous throughout the spring and summer months, as are neighborhood cookouts, American Legion fish fries, and car shows. Because much of Elkhart County is rural and the area is home to several bodies of water, locals enjoy camping, boating, and fishing in nice weather.
“Cruising”—driving classic cars and motorcycles through the downtowns of Elkhart County cities Goshen and Elkhart and meeting up for food and conversation—is also a popular pastime.

School spirit and athletic support are key features of community culture. Elkhart city high schools Central and Memorial are rivals, and locals are quick to identify which school they graduated from. Families support high school athletic programs long after all their children have left school. An autumn Friday night in Elkhart will find high school fields packed with families cheering on football teams and school marching bands. Given Elkhart’s long relationship with the band instrument industry, it is no surprise that marching bands attracts almost the same amount of fervor as football teams. On fair-weather weekends, it is common to encounter students and parents along the sides of Elkhart’s main roads, holding homemade signs promoting a plethora of car wash, port-a-pit chicken, and pork burger sale fundraisers. College athletics are also important in the area. Because Elkhart is just a few miles away from South Bend’s Notre Dame University, autumn is blue-and-gold season in Elkhart. On Saturdays throughout college football season, it is impossible to miss Notre Dame shirts, hats, bumper stickers, and lawn decorations. In the spring, Elkhart contributes its fair share to the Indiana “Hoosier Madness” stereotype with inescapable basketball tournament chatter in bars, coffee shops, and in church on Sundays. Elkhart is a community where sports icons Lou Holtz (a legendary Notre Dame football coach) and Rudy Ruettiger (the Notre Dame football player who inspired the film Rudy) are treated with a reverence that even the U.S. President does not elicit.

Religion is important in Elkhart County, which is home to over 280 churches. In this overwhelmingly Christian area, nearly 41 percent of the population attends church regularly and most people acknowledge a church affiliation (Elkhart County Horizon Project 2009). Religious ‘blue laws’ prohibit alcohol sales on Sundays, and these days find the vast majority of local
businesses closed and area downtowns nearly empty. Religion is a key part of most events (including public school meetings and games), which almost always begin or end with prayer. Wednesday night bible studies, small group meetings, Vacation Bible School, church bake sales, and outreach programs are traditions that bring the community together in shared faith. As one local explains, one of Elkhart’s greatest appeals is that it is a “bible belt environment that is good for families” (Elkhart County Horizon Project 2009).

**An Entrepreneurial Heritage: “New reason for hope”**

Elkhart’s first claim to entrepreneurial fame came when C.G. Conn introduced a new trumpet mouthpiece and other instrument innovations. He established a band instrument manufacturing company in 1877, and Elkhart soon became the biggest instrument producer in the U.S., gaining national prominence as the “Band Instrument Capital of the World.” The industrial scene diversified in 1884 when Dr. Franklin Miles, another local innovator, established Miles Laboratories. This pharmaceutical company would produce well-known products Alka Seltzer and Flintstones Vitamins (Wenger 2002). The railroad, band instrument, and pharmaceutical industries laid a manufacturing foundation for the region, and innovators Conn and Miles became icons of an entrepreneurial spirit highly valued by the community.

The New York Central Railroad Company’s decision to relocate locomotive shops to Ohio deepened local economic woes during the Great Depression. However, the region has long shared the persistent optimism that characterizes the U.S. in general. In Elkhart, “slowly but surely ... as the sun rises and sets, there would be new reasons for hope” (Wenger 2002:113). This enduring optimism was gratified when local innovators created and began to mass-produce the motorized camper, the earliest form of the RV and what would become the driving economic force of the area. As Elkhart became the center of the new and expanding RV industry, mergers
and heightened competition in band instrument and pharmaceutical markets caused these local industries to decline. RV’s soon eclipsed all others to become the area’s dominant industry. By the end of the 1950’s, Elkhart annually hosted the largest RV show in the country, and by the early 1970’s, it was known as the “RV Capital of the World.” RV’s enabled Elkhart to flourish through latter half of the twentieth century, and residents consider the birth and rise of the RV industry to be yet more evidence of their endemic entrepreneurial spirit and unique community values.

R.V. Capital of the World

2010 marked the centennial of the recreational vehicle (RV). An RV is a towable or motorized vehicle that combines transportation and living quarters. Though automobile owners began modifying their vehicles to make them more livable almost as soon as the auto was introduced, it wasn’t until 1910 that the first mass manufactured trailers appeared on the U.S. market. Created as a way to improve camping, these early trailers and campers included a seat that folded into a bed, a chamber pot, and a fold-down sink attached to the chauffeur’s seat. The recreational camper and trailer industry grew steadily throughout the beginning of the twentieth century as Americans took to the roads to explore the newly established U.S. National Park System. The stock market crash and Great Depression slowed the newly conceived industry, but not for long. In fact, historian Al Hesselbart points out “in some ways, the Depression created a new need for mobile homes. Homeowners who lost their houses were forced into an itinerate lifestyle by economic conditions” (Hesselbart 2007:7).

The 1930’s and 40’s saw the slow but steady growth of the industry. Because several industry innovators and pioneers were from Elkhart, the early industry was concentrated in the area. In 1933, a resident from nearby Mishawaka invented the first motor camper vehicle from
parts salvaged from auto yards. This and similar innovations inspired others, and many manufacturers, including Schult and Sportsman, established themselves in the area in the decades preceding WWII. Rationing and WWII demands again challenged the industry, but following the war, it exploded. This was when the term ‘recreational vehicle,’ or ‘RV,’ was first coined to describe these trailers, campers, and motorized homes.

The 1950’s and 60’s brought new technology, including pressurized water systems, refrigerators, air conditioning, bathtubs, and other creature comforts. To appeal to a growing market, the industry began to improve RV’s dramatically by making them larger, more dependable, and more secure. These improvements dramatically increased the appeal of the RV. At the same time, the expendable income of the growing middle class and post-war baby boom necessitated affordable travel accommodations for families. Pairing this need with a traditional American love of travel, nature and camping, the RV industry was able to provide affordable motorized units for the U.S. middle class. These changing population conditions meant that RV ownership expanded rapidly: “Between 1963 and 1973, the nation’s recorded production of motorhomes exploded from approximately 200 to more than 65,000 annually” (Hesselbart 2007:34). RV sales have increased 60% since 1980, and the RV rental market continues to grow. It is clear that the American love affair with the RV remains strong. Industry studies estimate that today, nearly one in 12 U.S. vehicle-owning households – roughly 8 million households – also own an RV.

One of the primary reasons that the recreational vehicle has remained popular in American life is that it is changed with the times and kept pace with advancing technology. Originally engineered from spare parts salvaged from junkyards, RV’s have come a long way. In fact, today’s models would be virtually unrecognizable to industry forefathers. There are two
types of RV’s – towables and motorized. Towables, the less costly of the two, can be mounted on a truck or pulled by a car, van, or truck. The most common towables are travel trailers, fifth wheels, and pop-ups. The more expensive RV is the motorhome, which combines the driving unit and living quarters in the same vehicle which the driving unit and living quarters are part of the same unit. Motorhomes are divided into three categories based on size, and are typically larger, more expensive, and more luxurious than towables. Modern RV’s offer all of the comforts of home, including master bedrooms with king sized beds, garbage disposals, washers and dryers, satellite television, and slide out additions that considerably increase the size of RV living quarters. Once used primarily to make camping more comfortable, they are now more often used as a luxury form of travel. In fact, ranging in price anywhere from $10,000 to $650,000, “it seems that only your budget limits the comforts of an RV” (Morrison 2010).

The Baby Boom generation, whose arrival sparked the initial expansion of the market, has remained a key demographic for the industry. The typical RV owner is a married homeowner in their mid-50’s, with an annual income over $70,000. Boomers have retained a love of RV’s from their childhoods, and as a cohort that is “wealthier and more nomadic than any other generation,” they are the primary consumers of trailers, campers, and motor homes (Blackerby 2006). As the Boomer generation reaches retirement age in the coming years, it is expected that a great many of them will join the nearly one million Americans who have sold their home to live and travel full time in their RV’s. Consumers continue to use RV’s for the time-honored American pastimes of camping, recreation, and travel. By accommodating these traditional American activities, the RV has become a central part of U.S. cultural representations of the open road and American freedom.

Elkhart County is the center of the RV universe, and, in turn, because over 25 percent of
its economy is directly tied to their production, RV’s are the center of Elkhart’s universe (Elkhart County Horizon Project 2009). RV sales have grown 60 percent since 1980 alone; this surge in demand spurred industry expansion in Elkhart and solidified its position as the industry’s capital. Over the past three decades, the region experienced a steady population growth that outpaced the growth rates of the state of Indiana and the U.S. as a whole.

The RV industry is one in which advanced education has never been a prerequisite for high income, and it has long been typical for locals to secure well-paid factory jobs immediately after high school. Only 17 percent of Elkhart residents have earned a Bachelor’s degree or higher, while 24 percent of U.S. citizens have done so (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010). This marked lag in educational attainment has not resulted in a proportionate lag in income: In 2008, the median household income in Elkhart County was $49,700 a figure only slightly lower than the national median income of $52,200 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2010). Because Elkhart has one of the lowest costs of living in the U.S., these earnings can be stretched quite far (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). These jobs have been widely available because manufacturing provides 52 percent of the area’s jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Thanks to the RV industry, Elkhart has the highest percentage of manufacturing jobs in the U.S., approximately four times as many as the nation as a whole (Elkhart County Horizon Project 2009). RV work has long been a largely—if not consistently—prosperous presence in Elkhart, and the community produces over 70 percent of the recreational vehicles sold in the U.S. (Schoen 2009).

The tightly bound, dependent relationship between Elkhart and the RV industry causes local prospects to rise and fall with industrial tides. The nature of this relationship became evident when the 1973 oil crisis shook the RV industry and caused a staggering spike in unemployment (from less than1 percent in 1972 to 17.1 percent in 1974) (Jacobson 2009).
blistering pace and catastrophic rise in poverty and homelessness caused by this skyrocketing unemployment illustrated the extent to which the industry determines local prospects. Experts at the time speculated that the oil crisis would be the end of Elkhart as a “prosperous Midwestern city ... a good place to live” (Brunker 2009). Their predictions were proven wrong when the RV market quickly recovered and once again brought prosperity to Elkhart. As the RV market continuously expanded over the next thirty years, calls for economic diversification were abandoned and the region continued to almost entirely rely on the industry as a source of jobs and economic stability.

Apart from difficulties caused by the 1973 oil crisis, strong growth, industry expansion, and high incomes have been RV industry norms. As such, RV’s enabled Elkhart to flourish and grow even as other manufacturing communities endured deindustrialization and decline. Elkhart has long been a place with plentiful jobs (unemployment was below three percent for most of the 1990’s and below five percent in the first years of the new millennium) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010) and relatively high incomes.

CORE COMMUNITY VALUES

A place that some residents say is the “entrepreneurial capital of America,” Elkhart is proud of its enterprising heritage and culture, and RV workers believe that core community values—entrepreneurialism, individualism, and a strong work ethic—distinguish their community and industry.

Entrepreneurialism: “We invent things here”

Like the automobile, the great American icon it was inspired by and derived from, the RV symbolizes the core U.S. cultural values of freedom and adventure. The RV lifestyle is “a strange blend of individualism and wanderlust that drives thousands of Americans to spend their
summers barreling down the nation’s highways...” (Jones 2009). This yearning for exploration and adventure manifests itself in travel, a favorite American pastime. Indeed, “America has always been a country of dreamers. The earliest settlers came here looking for happiness and freedom to live a life of their own choosing. They ... laid the groundwork for our nation’s love of recreational travel” (Hesselbart 2007:15). By allowing one to bring home on the road, RV’s make it possible to comfortably pursue widely held dreams of roaming the country, exploring new sites, and taking up the adventure of the frontier.

Beyond fulfilling cultural desires for adventure, the RV is also a symbol of freedom. Full-time RV traveler Kevin Ewert explains: “What we’re doing with the RV is blazing our own trail and getting out there and seeing all these places. I think it’s a very iconic American thing” (Morrison 2010). RV enthusiasts see themselves as enjoying the greatest gift the U.S. has to offer: freedom. Industry pioneer Wally Byam confirms that RV’s make freedom a way of life by granting individuals “Freedom from arrangements ... freedom from the problems of age ... freedom to know ... and freedom for fun” (Hesselbart 2007:110). For many, “the RV has become the new Harley Davidson – a symbol of nomadic freedom” (MacDonald 2007). This embodiment of wanderlust is an iconic part of American culture. It is fitting that it hails from Elkhart, a place that locals see as also iconically American. Elkhart and the RV are inseparable: Both the icon and the community that gave birth to it embody the core cultural values of individual freedom and entrepreneurial adventure.

When describing Elkhart, business leaders, retirees, production workers, and librarians alike emphasize that Elkhart is known for inventing things. The community has long defined itself as a hive of industrial ingenuity (Wenger 2002). Elkhart County has long filed more patents per capita than any other county in Indiana (Economic Development Corporation of Elkhart
County 2009)—a piece of information that numerous workers proudly mentioned when describing their community. That this fact is such a point of conceit illustrates the importance of innovation to community identity. This pride is present in the oft-repeated description of Elkhart as a place where anyone can, as one resident explained, “build something out of nothing.” According to one local leader: “Here in Elkhart County, innovation and entrepreneurship ... are embedded in how we think ... innovation is something we rely on here; it's part of our culture” (Gattman 2009). This faith in individual ingenuity and possibility is widely shared, and many workers noted that this unique entrepreneurial spirit can’t be found anywhere else. As Joe explains, “We always come up with something new. Always have, always will. It may take a while, but we’ll do it. We invent things here that change everything.”

RV workers share an understanding of the industry’s history of entrepreneurial innovation. Those who have been in the industry for several decades experienced what they describe as the “old days.” Accounts of the past describe the earlier years of the industry as a time when an average working person with a small sum of money and a good idea could start an RV shop in their garage. According to workers, world of Elkhart RVs was an exciting entrepreneurial frontier inhabited by small plants started by local innovators. Workers maintain that these small, independent plants were the vital life force of the industry. Howard has 35 years of RV experience and a firsthand knowledge of what several workers label the ‘mom and pop’ environment of the RV industry:

My father, back in the late 70’s, him and his brother started their own RV company. They made truck campers and travel trailers and mini-motor homes. I started working with them in the 9th grade ... He’d pick me up after school and I’d go there and work. I learned early.

This story is common, according to RV workers Richard, 59, and his son William, 36. William relates that his father was part of the early ‘mom and pop’ culture of invention. Gesturing to his dad, he exclaims, “He did that!” and points to a large building on their property,
continuing, “Down there, that brown building down there? That was supposed to be NewMoves. My dad started his own down there!” Though this venture was unsuccessful and Richard returned to working for others, he made the attempt to start his own business because, he explains, “That was the spirit of the times.” Howard recalls, “Mom and pop shops was all there was ... It was kind of fun back in the heyday. Back then, shoot, everywhere you go there was an RV factory. People was starting up out of their garages and everything.”

Lucy, 50, has worked in RV’s for 25 years. She notes that she and most others had worked at “quite a few little mom and pop places.” Jeffrey, employed in similar settings, describes these ad-hoc, entrepreneurial environs: “We built campers in a pole barn out back ... [it was] kind of not official. We had blueprints drawn on the back of a piece of paper. It was thrown together, touch and go.” Independent RV operations were ubiquitous, and all who have been in the industry for 20 years or more have worked in at least one such place Most workers, particularly those who have been in RV’s for many years, express the belief that ‘mom and pop’ innovators gave life to the industry and Elkhart.

The understanding that entrepreneurship gave life to RV’s a spark to Elkhart is not limited to those who have been in the industry for decades. Younger workers and those not employed in RV’s paint an identical picture. Each account describes the early days of the RV industry as a time when factories sprung up in garages and barns seemingly overnight. These humble operations typically employed a handful of workers and produced small batches of units. The “old days” are also understood as a time when anyone could start an RV company and become a millionaire. Tales of early innovation—like the story of Holiday Rambler entrepreneur Dick Klinger building his first trailers in a chicken coop—are related again and again.
Though the stories differ in detail, their message is the same: In the “old days,” the RV industry was a hive of entrepreneurial invention where anyone with a good idea, strong work ethic, and the willingness to take a risk could start an RV empire from their garage. The overarching legacy of the RV industry’s “old days” has been an entrenched entrepreneurial culture that permeates Elkhart and informs RV workers’ worlds.

**Individualism: “Self-Reliant and Proud as Hell”**

Although the core U.S. value of individualism is not idiosyncratically entrepreneurial, it is, nonetheless, a requisite of entrepreneurship. Unsurprisingly, this core value is has a strong presence in Elkhart, and can be found embedded in individual attitudes and community politics. Residents of all stripes—from unemployed workers and small business owners to church leaders and state employees—express a keen commitment to individual freedom and self-reliance. Eric, an RV worker and lifelong Elkhart resident in his 40’s, explains that the people of Elkhart are “strong, determined, and proud as hell.” He and several other RV workers I spoke with noted that they pride themselves on their ability to work and take care of themselves and their families without relying on state or external resources. Local politics have been shaped by this prevalent individualistic ethos; residents tend to be uncomfortable with the idea of government assistance and are suspicious of anything that could curtail individual freedoms.

To win public office in the county, a candidate must run on a platform consisting of strong individual liberty (defense of the Second Amendment) and classical liberal economic (pro-business, low taxes, anti-regulation) planks. This tried and true ideological formula for political success is one reason Elkhart County is a conservative stronghold in Indiana, the “reddest” state in the very “red” Midwest. County officials prize local governance over federal administration, echoing a disdain for the federal government that is prevalent throughout the
community. Recent economic struggle have brought this indomitable individualism to the forefront. Despite suffering devastating economic and social effects resulting from the financial meltdown and recession, many remain committed to an individualistic rejection of assistance. Discussions about federal economic aid commonly include a variation of the expression repeated by Elkhart Mayor Dick Moore: “We need a hand up, not a hand out” (Lewis 2010). Though many appreciate President Obama’s focus on Elkhart, they worry that his attention portrays them as dependent on outsiders for help, an identity they abhor. Locals’ expressions of individualism are, in many ways, little different from those made throughout the U.S. In other ways, however, Elkhart’s strain of individualism is deeply and explicitly entrepreneurial.

The entrepreneurialist thread in Elkhart’s individualism can be seen in the region’s approach to business. Republican Governor Mitch Daniels passed the largest tax cut in Indiana history, privatized transportation and telecommunications infrastructure, cut property taxes by over 30 percent, and slashed the state budget by $440 million (Warren 2010). These gubernatorial actions were quite popular in Elkhart County, as was the state response to the financial crisis that introduced tax phase-ins, venture capital and business investment tax credits, and free rents. Several residents explain that federal and state regulations are, for the most part, violations of individual potential because they are obstacles to entrepreneurship. They note that individual freedom is the basis for ingenuity, which is ultimately the only thing that will secure Elkhart’s future. One local investor explains: “If there is any community anywhere in this country that can turn things around and rebuild themselves, it's Elkhart County. Their entrepreneurial spirit is second to none” (Economic Development Corporation of Elkhart County 2009).
Elkhart’s entrepreneurial individualism is also manifest in its strongly pro-business/anti-organized labor environment. With union membership rates below the U.S. average, Indiana is also part of a minority of states that do not recognize implied contracts protecting employees from arbitrary or unfair termination. Governor Daniels’ explicit anti-union stance has not lost him support in Elkhart, a place where union activity is scant and anti-union sentiment is strong. In fact, despite its long history of manufacturing and industry, the area never had a significant labor tradition, and is currently home to just a few small and struggling unions. The scarcity of organizing efforts is beneficial to businesses. As the Economic Development Corporation of Elkhart County notes, “If you are a manufacturer, you find the workforce in Elkhart County and Indiana’s low union membership to be two of the main advantages to moving or expanding here” (2009).

Workers in the region’s largest and most profitable industry—RV’s—have never organized. In fact, a great many RV workers revile unions and their members, frequently describing them as, among other things, “lazy,” “selfish,” and “old fashioned.” Sean, 36, laid off after 18 years in RV’s, sums up this prevalent sentiment, exclaiming, “Unions suck! They just do!” Unlike those in other communities throughout the U.S (with, it should be noted, strong traditions of individualism), Elkhart’s workers do not pair manufacturing and unionization. Rather, many see unionization as a barrier to individual freedom and a hindrance to enterprise. Using their industry as an example, RV workers explain that unionization would have killed RV’s by discouraging entrepreneurs, driving up prices, and producing a lazy workforce. This pro-business, anti-union environment reflects the widespread stance that individualism is important because it is the foundation for entrepreneurship. The inseparable qualities of individualism and entrepreneurship are seen as responsible for past success and, according to one
lifelong resident, they ensure that Elkhart “...will survive ...We will come through with something on our own, sometime, somewhere.”

**Hard Work: “That’s what makes us great!”**

Though the work varies depending on the manufacturer one works for and the type of RV one builds, most production workers describe similar conditions and experiences. Almost all RV’s are assembled on a line. Each stop the RV makes on the line involves the addition and installation of a new element (gas lines, electrical wiring, flooring, sidewalls, cabinetry, etc.). The workers at each position on the line must complete an installation or addition before the unit moves on. Individuals work in different “groups” which each have a “group leader.” Groups are able to negotiate individual responsibilities and assist each other when needed. It is not unusual for group members to do different tasks throughout the day, thereby avoiding monotony and keeping the work interesting. One worker explains that she likes RV work because “groups make it better. You have to think. You’re not doing the same thing over and over, so you don’t get bored because you do different stuff.” The group leader is tasked with resolving issues and is ultimately responsible for seeing to it that work is done efficiently and properly. Group work ensures that the work process is social, and groups often become very close. One worker described his electrical group as his “family.” Workers often stay in groups for months or even years, but rarely for their entire tenure at a plant. It is more common for workers to gain a skill in one area and then move to another area to learn a new skill.

Nearly all of Elkhart’s RV shops run piece rate, meaning that workers get a small hourly base rate of pay and largest portion of their earnings comes from a per-unit bonus. This payment method makes the number of hours one works relatively unimportant. Piece rate pay allows workers to spend less time at work, motivating them to produce as much as possible in as little
time as possible. As one worker explains, “Getting out early – that’s the whole purpose of the piece rate. You get a good group of guys, they come in, they work well together, they do a good job, they hustle – they get the job done, and they go home. That’s piece rate. In the day, I can remember gettin’ out of there at 11:00, 10:30, even earlier, on a good day.” Work begins early and ends when the required units have been completed for the day. Most factories run just one shift, which usually begins at 6 am. This start time requires workers to rise early. Vincent, 34, says, “People that worked in the RV industry, they’re not lazy. We got up at 4:30 in the morning every day.”

Though most workers express that adjusting to early hours was a major challenge, they point out that an early beginning to the workday meant an early end to the workday. It was not uncommon for a day’s work to end by 12 or 1 o’clock. These shorter days are seen as a major advantage of RV work, as Stanley, 57, says: “It’s great. You did your job, you got to go home early, and you got your paycheck. And that was more than enough...And you didn’t have to put in a full 40 to get it. You worked fast, you got your job done, and you went home.” Short days are common in RV work, but the piece rate method means that sometimes, workers must work very long hours to complete the day’s requirements. Production changeovers, complex units, or problems with equipment can result in longer workdays. These longer workdays are less rewarding because piece rate, unlike overtime pay, does not make working more hours very financially rewarding. As Brian, 32, puts it, “You’ve got so much work that you’ve gotta get done. And, when you’re finished, you’re done. And, if you’re not finished, you stay and do it.” These longer days are less common than short ones, but they did occur regularly. Workers cited the longer days as one of the major drawbacks of RV work. Richard explains: “Because of piece
rate, if we got out in 6 or 8 hours, you know, it would be good…but some days are 8 hours, a lot of days are 12 to 14 hours. So yeah, it’s hard work.”

One commonly cited characteristic of RV work is its varied nature. When asked to describe working in RV’s, most workers explained that they had spent their careers doing a variety of different jobs. Dennis explains, “I think I’m kind of one of those kind of jack of all trades master of none types of things. I can do enough of most things...” Many other workers described themselves as ‘jacks of all trade’ within the industry. Bob describes the varied nature of the work: “And then, depending on production, the number, they’d switch us around in what we do... You know, your job will change. I did a lot of different stuff.”

Almost all production workers explain that moving around and changing departments was just the nature of the industry. Sean, 36, an unemployed RV worker with 18 years of experience explains, “in the RV industry, if you can do a little bit of anything, you could go to any one of the major manufacturers and get a job doing something.” The varied nature of RV work ensures that anyone who has been in the business for even a few years picks up many diverse skills. The longer one’s work experience, the more likely it is that they have a broad knowledge of RV assembly. After ten years in the industry most workers have the ability to work on almost any part of a unit. This is particularly true for males, who are moved around more than females. Because most RV’s are assembled the same way, workers can and do take and use their diverse skills from factory to factory. Additionally, workers can move from group to group within a factory, filling in wherever and whenever necessary. This makes production time efficient because the line rarely pauses due to a gap in skilled workers. Time efficiency is important to workers, because it is the basis of what is considered one of the best parts of RV work—a short work day.
Because workers can leave the plant when the allotted day’s work is completed, they work very fast. Accounts of RV work unfailingly include emphasis on the importance and difficulty of keeping up with the movement of the line. Sharon, 41, says, “The line never moves slowly. So chances are you have too much to do.” Younger workers were more likely to describe the speed of work as being one of the best parts of their job because they felt it made time go by faster. Vincent, who mostly worked as a sander, feels that fast paced work was ideal for him He explains, “I’m a very aggressive, fast paced worker. I mean the thing about the RV industry is it’s fast. I’m programmed to work like that.” Those who had positive feelings about the speed of the line were in the minority. Most workers felt that the pace of the line was the hardest part of the job. Stanley points out, “I wish at the time that it wasn’t quite as fast paced. I mean, you could even do a little better job if you got to think a second on some of them.” Arthur, 43, considers that speed became even more of challenge when industry booming: “it was all out, get it done, 30 units a day in 8 hours, move the line every 10 minutes kind of thing, and it was real hustle bustle.” The tempo of the work initially intimidated Barb, 40, as she explains: “at first I didn’t like it, you know, I didn’t think I was going to make it through the rough part, getting used to it, picking up speed and all that.” The pace of the work is particularly challenging because the work is very physical.

The speed of the line increases the physical wear and tear that RV work takes on a worker. The work involves all types of physical action, including heavy lifting, climbing, balancing, crawling on hands and knees, and laying on one’s back. Bob has experience in each place on the RV line. He points out that RV work involves “running in and out and up and down steps and hurrying around and stuff like that, so it was pretty physical…” Stanley agrees that RV work “kills your body. Because where I was at, we were moving like 14, sometimes 18 units a
day out the door…you know, you’re just doing your job, working on it, and they’re pushing it
down the line, you know?” Installation work involves welding, sanding, cutting, cleaning, and
other physical tasks that can be dirty, dangerous, and have long-term physical effects. Workers
who have been in the industry for several years make it clear that the work takes a serious
physical toll on the body.

Stories of pinched nerves, limited mobility, arthritis, breathing problems and other long
term issues are commonplace, as are anecdotes of co-workers who have broken limbs, been
electrocuted, burned, or permanently disabled. Karen, a 38-year-old mother of two with 20 years
of RV experience says that the physical toll of the work was very high. She points to her arms,
which are covered with dozens of small faint scars, explaining, “I get all cut up from it... I was a
final finish cleaner. So, you know, you’d sweep under the drawers and get cuts and I was always
on my knees.” The physical requirements of the RV world are exacting and workers would come
home completely exhausted. William says, “I’ve got two boys and most of the time I’m too tired
to spend time with them. I come home and some nights I’m in bed by, what, 7 o’clock...I’m
ready to go to sleep.” One worker explains, “most people, they’re going home and watching TV
and going to bed early, because they’re too beat to do anything else.” According to most, RV
work is not and has never been easy.

A great many workers echo William’s sentiments about RV work. In fact, the most often
mentioned descriptor of the RV world is that it is “hard work.” Joe has experience on every part
of the RV line. His most recent job, which he held for 10 years, was as a swingman in the
lamination department. Speaking from over 30 years of RV experience, he explains: “It's not one
of them light jobs. It was hard labor. A factory-- you got those big old machines, and you gotta
move...You have to be able to handle hard work if you’re gonna make it in the RV industry.”
Randall points out that hard work is the status quo in RV’s, and that only hard workers survive. He often found the difficulty of the work overwhelming, recalling, “They were just piling more, and more, and more, and more, on—you had to do it to keep up with it. If you didn't keep up with it, it buried you...It was for survival, for me to survive to keep my job, you know? ... It’s that type of pace and it wears on you. My wife said it was killing me.”

Workers from every part of the production process—electrical to sewing to final finish—said that more than anything else, RV work is often grueling labor. They believe themselves and their fellow RV workers to be especially hard workers, as Vincent says, “I’m built for it. I’m a hard worker, man. Not everybody can make it in this industry.” Workers take a measure of pride in their ability to survive in the RV world, as they believe it separates them from others. Joe illustrates this belief with a story: “We had a wall of shame... The whole time we were writing people's names that had been through our department. We got up to 83 people. In the 10 years that I was there. That's why they called it the wall of shame. The people that didn't cut the mustard, they were gone.” Proud of their ability to do “hard work,” the majority of the workers I spoke with echoed sentiments similar to Randall’s assertion that RV workers are “the hardest working people in America. That’s what makes us great!”

It is, then, evident that a profound reverence for entrepreneurship and a conviction that an enterprising spirit is innate to the people of the community are very much embedded in Elkhart. Important to this culture are the prominent values of entrepreneurialism, individualism, and hard work. These values have influenced the community’s history and political and business environments, and, as later chapters demonstrate, very much shape RV workers’ beliefs and experiences.
CHAPTER FOUR: ENTREPRENEURIAL WORKERS, ENTERPRISING SELVES IN “GOOD TIMES”

We were living like we were on top of the world because we were on top of the world… And we deserved to be there, too.

For decades, Elkhart’s RV industry was a source of well paid jobs that, as Howard notes in the quote above, enabled workers to live like they were “on top of the world.” Workers describe the industry boom preceding the economic crisis as a unique labor milieu that encouraged—and rewarded—their adherence to and enactment of individualistic entrepreneurial ideology. When their industry was thriving—years they call “good times”—neoliberal enterprise ideology encouraged behaviors such as “job hopping” and “running” that contributed to an environment of worker mobility and a focus on the present. Opening with a discussion of ideological hegemony and, more specifically, neoliberal ‘enterprise society’ ideology, this chapter then turns to an examination of the constant presence and variable manifestation of entrepreneurial thought and behavior at the height of the RV industry boom. In fostering and rewarding neoliberal enterprise values, it was a time that seemed to prove the ‘truth’ of hegemonic ideology—a ‘truth’ that, as detailed in later chapters, leaves workers questioning and disillusioned when the economic meltdown brought these prosperous times to a crashing halt.

Because analyzing the lived realities of economic crisis requires knowledge of the lived realities of life and work in a pre-crisis world, to understand workers’ experiences in “bad times,” we must first understand their lives and perspectives during “good times.”

HEGEMONIC ENTERPRENEURIAL IDEOLOGY

Ideological Hegemony

For Marx, ideology—the “production of ideas, of conceptions of consciousness” that is manifest in the mental life of people through the “language of politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics…” (Marx and Engels 1970:47)— is a tool for maintaining the interests of the
dominant class. Recognizing that “men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.” (Marx and Engels 1970:47), he nonetheless argues that these ideas tend to be those of the ruling class. Marx explains that the dominant class “...is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to present its interests as the common interest of all the members of society ... it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones” (Marx and Engels 1970:65-66). Although Marx had a more sophisticated appreciation for culture than many of his critics charge, his materialism left him rather blind him to the many diverse origins and consequences of culture and ideology.

Taking Marxist discourse beyond the dead end of materialist determinism, Gramsci’s theory of ideological hegemony provides a more nuanced treatment that opens space for analyzing how ideas work to construct, explain, and maintain social structure. Considering understandings of ‘false consciousness,’ he argues that that ideas matter—in fact, he says, they often matter more than anything else because they constitute the truths that serve as the organizing principles for societies. Gramsci recognizes that ideologies penetrate and are reproduced in all spheres of civil society, including “…schools, the media, culture, trade unions, the family, as well as the workplace…” (Boggs 1976:121). Transmitted through socialization and interactions within social institutions, ideologies constitute “a general conception of life, a philosophy, a scholastic program, and educative principle…” (Gramsci 1971:103-104) that shape individual consciousness. Because the dominant classes control social institutions (and, in turn, the ideologies they embody and disseminate), individuals are imbued with a worldview that naturalizes inequality, obfuscates exploitation, and supports the interests of the powerful. This, then, is ideological hegemony—“the permeation throughout civil society…of an entire system of
values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc. that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it” (Boggs 1976:39).

Gramsci and other similar thinkers understand the development of ideological hegemony to be an ongoing social negotiation consisting of the socialization of individuals to accept hegemonic ideals through a “general conception of life, a philosophy, a scholastic program, and educative principle…” (Gramsci 1971:103-104). This negotiation occurs in civil society—the institutions between the state and economy (education, religion, media, culture, etc.) that socialize humans and essentially define and shape the way they see and know their worlds. These institutions create a ‘common sense’ view of the world that naturalizes dominant values and understandings supportive of the capitalist order (Gramsci 1971; Williams 1977; [1980] 2005). Hegemonic ideology is experienced as a lived, habitual process. Rather than just a “false consciousness” generated and determined by the relations of production, ideological hegemony is a social process consisting of countless understandings, interactions and experiences.

As discussed in Chapter 2, taking a Gramscian approach to understanding hegemonic ideology reveals that there can be little question that “neo-liberal hegemony in Western culture is very close to absolute …” (McKenna 2004:17). Shaping everything from healthcare and educational practices to mainstream popular entertainment, neoliberalism has become a dominant ideological influence embedded in the fabric of contemporary U.S. institutions, culture, and daily life. A number of prominent studies have identified the influence of neoliberal ideology in a host of economic, political, and civil social institutions (Seider 1974; Crouch 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001; Ayers 2005; Speigel 2006; Van Arsdale 2008) tends to locate power in institutions and conceptualize it as control and/or direction of individuals: In general, these studies have found that neoliberal policy and ideology shapes institutions, and, in turn,
institutional processes dominate and manipulate individuals. Because this scholarship is largely concerned with institutions, it fails to furnish understandings that go beyond examining how neoliberalism “…infuses discourses and social practices at all levels of public and social organization” (McKenna 2004:17). In neglecting individual manifestations of hegemonic ideology, existing understandings fail to grapple with the complex matter of the lived realities of neoliberal thought—the ways it influences what individuals think, say, and do. To best get at these questions, it is most useful to combine Gramscian understandings of ideology with a Foucauldian approach to analyzing neoliberalism as individual practice.

**Neoliberal Ideology: The Enterprising Individual**

In neo-liberalism—and it does not hide this, it proclaims it—there is also a theory of *homo economicus*, but he is not at all a partner of exchange. *Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself … The stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo economicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo economicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings … In other words, the neo-liberals say that labor was in principle part of economic analysis, but the way in which classical economic analysis was conducted was incapable of dealing with this element. Good, we do deal with it (Foucault 2007:223).

In the brief passage cited above, Foucault cuts quickly establishes the ontology of neoliberalism—it is thought (as a Gramscian approach to ideology recognizes) and, importantly, it is lived daily practice. According to this perspective, the neoliberal individual is *homo economicus*—an economic actor, yes, but, more importantly, an *entrepreneur*. Modifying ‘strictly-business’ definitions of the entrepreneur as “one who organizes, manages, and assumes the risk of a business or enterprise” (Schumpeter 1934), Foucauldian analysis expands the purview of entrepreneurship to include non-business contexts. In doing so, this approach aligns the conception of entrepreneurship with the French root of entrepreneur, *entreprendre*—“to undertake.” It is an apt modification, as this body of work explores the new entrepreneurial undertakings that individuals are encouraged and expected to initiate. Those using a Foucauldian
enterprise society critique maintain that enterprise dominates contemporary capitalist societies. For the most part, they would agree with The Economist’s description of “Entrepreneurial Society”:

The rise of the entrepreneur, which has been gathering speed over the past 30 years, is not just about economics. It also reflects profound changes in attitudes to everything from individual careers to the social contract. It signals the birth of an entrepreneurial society (Entrepreneurial Society).

No longer germane to business alone, enterprise (and its concomitant norms and values) has been diffused throughout the social fabric.

The entrepreneurialization of man has been part and parcel of individualizing effects of modernization and neoliberalism (Foucault 1979; Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). The ascendant neoliberal logic that defines humans as enterprising beings who are primarily motivated by competition has been used as the rationale for the economic re-ordering of nearly every facet of social life (Rose 1990; 1999; Foucault 2010). Neoliberal policies seek to “extend the rationality of the market, the schemes of analysis it proposes and the decision-making criteria it suggests to areas that are not exclusively or primarily economic” (Nealon 2008:13). Social goods and institutions (healthcare, education, welfare, cultural production) are organized by the norms (individualization, flexibilization) and imperatives (efficiency, competition, profit) of the market (Foucault 2009). Because all of society is ordered by the principles of the free market, then, individuals are expected to shape themselves into those figures that are naturally best suited to thrive in the marketplace—entrepreneurs. Individual entrepreneurs are engaged in the grand pursuit of modern life – the enterprise of the self.

In the neoliberal world, power is enacted through ‘government,’ or the management of existence through economy and order (Foucault 1979; Rabinow 1984; Rose 1990). This management involves a “complex of notions, calculations, strategies and tactics through which
authorities ... have sought to act upon the lives and conducts of each and all in order to avert evils and achieve such desirable states as health, happiness, wealth and tranquility” (Rose 1992:143). The state and other authorities use practices of governmentality to encourage people to develop themselves into autonomous, desirable beings.

Today, “the dominant project of individuals’ lives is constructing and regulating their own human capital ... in an ‘enterprise of the self’” (Fenwick 2002b:707). Modern lives are enterprises in progress that must be constantly worked on and developed. Just as business entrepreneurs engage in ceaseless activity to develop their ventures, entrepreneurs of the self perpetually work to develop and refine personal qualities (Garrick and Usher 2000; Jones and Spicer 2005). The enterprise of the self is an endeavor centered on building “responsibility, discipline, diligence, and so forth” (Rose 1992:144)—capacities that will allow them to survive and thrive in the free market (which is, in essence, all of human social life).

To be successful in this enterprise, self-entrepreneurs must embody entrepreneurial attitudes and behaviors. They are taught and encouraged to do so through practices of governmentality that are exercised by a diversity of authorities (political, economic, medical, cultural, etc.). Thus, governmental society fosters entrepreneurial traits including individualism, invention and innovation, hard work, flexibility, and risk (Aldridge 1998; du Gay 2004; McCabe 2008). It is imperative that, above all, individuals are committed to realizing their visions and constructing their identities. In doing so, they must be flexible, embrace the possibilities of the market by taking risks and seeking new frontiers, and adept at using innovation and consumption to assert themselves in the world (du Gay and Salaman 1992; du Gay 1996; Mangan 2009). Daily beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors are tools that entrepreneurs may use to construct and refine the work-in-progress that is the self.
ENTREPRENEURIAL RV WORKERS

Hard Work: “R.V.’s are hard, but they pay good”

Early hours, grueling work, and the long-term physical effects of RV employment have been considered an acceptable price to pay for the biggest draws of working in the industry—good money and job security. Charles, 46, does electrical wiring for RV’s. Despite having just a high school education and no formal training, before the industry declined, he typically earned $60-70 thousand a year. He explains, “When it comes to the money, you make good money in the RV industry. You know, back when I first started off, I was making something like 1600 dollars a week.” Most workers relate similar experiences, noting that it was the big paychecks that first drew them to RV work.

Elkhart residents point out that the RV industry has been a source of high-paying jobs for decades. As one older worker explains, “It’s a known fact that RV’s are hard but they pay good.” When asked why she chose to do such physically demanding work, Tiffany, 24, exclaims, “Because I heard about the big bonuses! They were bringing home like $900 and $1000 a week. I wanted that ... I wanted a piece of that pie, and I got it. I wanted to be part of that group, you know?” Peter, 18, started his first RV job after earning his GED at 17. Laid off after working for just six months, he spent the two months he was unemployed applying for every RV job he could, and was recently hired as a cutter at MidWest. Peter chose to enter the industry after witnessing the large checks brought home by a parent. He says, “My father liked working in the factories. It made good money. He had to raise three kids on his own, so it helped him out a lot.” Average income varied by employer and the number of orders being filled, but almost every worker confirms that, when the industry was booming, RV work provided, as Arthur, 43, puts it, “The best money I ever made in my life.”
Since the mid-1980’s, the RV industry has provided jobs that are both well paid and secure. The majority of workers interviewed report that layoffs were not a common feature of the industry. Though most manufacturers do technically lay off workers for two to three weeks during industry shutdowns in December and July, these layoffs are scheduled and therefore expected. For many, their recent/current layoff was the first time they had ever lost an RV job. Randall, 63, explains, “I’ve never been laid off in 40-some years ... First time I’ve ever drawn unemployment in my life.” Others had been laid off before, mostly during economic slumps in the 1970’s and early 1980’s but none of those interviewed had experienced a layoff in the last 15 years. Elkhart workers have, for the most part, experienced the RV industry as a source of steady employment and good money. These high incomes and jobs were the products of a tight labor market—a labor setting that encouraged individualistic behavior and enabled RV workers to engage in employment entrepreneurialism.

Risk Taking and Individualism: “You could pretty much do any damn thing you wanted”

Workers like Joe, 51, have a great deal of nostalgia for industry days gone by—what they commonly call “good times.” As he describes his 30 years in RV’s, he exclaims, “Oh! I hear a song coming on!” and starts singing, "It was the days, my friend. We thought they'd never end..." then laughs and says, “Well, talking about good times brought it on!” Joe is not alone, and all who have been in the industry for more than five years recall that, although their jobs weren’t perfect and the labor was never easy, the industry used to be a good place to work. Most agree that the “good times” were the 1990’s and early 2000’s, when RV orders were up and plants competed to recruit and keep employees. If manufacturers could not attract and retain workers, they would fail to share in the record profits available at the height of the industry boom. To maintain and increase market share, employers did everything they could to attract help, creating
an environment several workers termed an “employee’s market.” Sam, 49, is laid-off after more than 20 years in the industry. He explains, “It used to be an employee or a worker’s market. It used to be that you could pick and choose what jobs you wanted. And employers would offer you good enticements and good pay to come work for them.” Most echo this description, agreeing that in this “employee’s market,” people had their pick of jobs, getting hired at a plant was effortless, and individual workers enjoyed a large measure of power.

The hallmark of the “employee’s market” was an abundance of RV production jobs. Numerous manufacturers and soaring demand produced a labor shortage. Bob, 55, remembers, “Here a few years ago, they run articles in the Elkhart paper all the time about there being a shortage of workers.” The tight labor market prompted manufacturers to recruit workers from outside the area. Elton, 51, has 30 years of RV experience, the last several of which were spent as a supervisor at two manufacturers. He recalls, “Man, I’ve been up here years when we were begging for help. We sent ads down in Tennessee, Texas, all the way down into Mexico. Our mayor put an ad up—Wanted: RV Workers. The mayor of Elkhart did that!” Securing employment in this labor milieu was not a challenge and workers could pick from an overabundance of open positions. Local unemployment was extraordinarily low and, as Tony, 64, says, “The only people that weren’t working was the people that didn’t want to work.”

In this “employee’s market,” manufacturers had virtually no barriers to employment and they utilized extremely informal hiring processes. Almost all workers interviewed recall that they got their start in the high-paying industry without formal training or experience and with relatively little education. Jack, now 41, was a young father who left high school for RV work in order to support his son. He describes his first job:
I started at Python when I was 18, maybe just getting ready to turn 19. It was easy! ... Oh yeah, without any type of college education or anything. All I had to do was get in there and prove that I was willing to work, go the extra mile.

The labor shortage left manufacturers desperate for workers and unable to require advanced skills or extensive experience as qualifications for employment. In early RV booms of the 1970’s and 1980’s, a high school education was not required for one to secure a high-paying production job. Later booms of the 1990’s and 2000’s required employees to have at least received a GED, though exceptions to this rule were common. In addition, the hiring process itself was informal. Most have at least one hiring tale like Bob’s:

I’ve gotten many jobs where I never even fill out an application until I knew I was hired. You walked in the door, you asked, “Who’s the plant manager here?” And you go talk to him … That’s how you applied for an RV job. So that’s how I got into the RV industry, was going and talking to the plant manager … Not going into the office and filling out an app. And I would say that I’ve gotten more jobs in the RV industry that way than the way people do it now.

These prevalent features of the “employee’s market” culture made it easy for workers to move from job to job, a common practice in “good times.”

A plenitude of available jobs inspired workers to engage in what several workers call “job hopping.” It was common practice to leave one job for a better one without giving notice. Charles has been in the industry for over twenty years, working as an electrician for the past fifteen. He recalls: “When it was good, you could quit a job right now, walk out the door, and go to the next plant, the next company over, and get a job.” Relating employment histories packed with multiple employers, several people explain that they, like most RV workers, had engaged in their share of “job hopping.” In fact, when asked which companies they had worked for, many noted that it might be easier to recall which companies they hadn’t worked for. Dennis, a 44 year-old worker who’s just found a new job after San Marco, his employer for 13 years, went out of business, describes this feature of RV work culture: “That’s one thing about the RV industry. It’s like … gypsies I call it, because they jump different places.” This high mobility put workers
in a powerful position. They used their leverage to elicit what they wanted from management. Howard reminisces, “It was like, screw you! I’m gonna go over here ... this guy buys you pizza and beer after work on Fridays!”

More important than these enticements, however, was a plant’s daily atmosphere. Workers influenced factory work environments by using their advantageous positions to demand that managers treat them well. According to Ralph, 62, “That’s why it was better to work in them days. They didn’t get on your case so much about every little thing and put such a load on you.” Many workers recall management slights inspiring them to walk off a job. Upon leaving, they would either immediately get a different job or demand (and usually receive) an apology from the offending manager. Charles relates one such incident. Despite working at a plant for weeks he had not been put on bonus-rate pay. After several requests, he confronted his boss:

And as he was refusing to put me on rate, my cell phone starts ringing and it was one of the guys that I was working with before that had quit and gone somewhere else. He was calling me like “Hey man, we need an electrician over here.” And I was like, hold on one second. And I asked the boss one more time about putting me on rate ... And he said, “Didn’t I just tell you that you ain’t getting no rate?” So I told him “Look, find another electrician.” And I walked out and went straight over to FrontierWays and they put me on rate that same day.

According to most, if your boss didn’t treat you well, they wouldn’t be your boss for long.

High pay was an RV manufacturer’s most important tool for attracting and retaining good help. Manufacturers competed for scarce labor resources by raising bonuses, and individual workers took advantage of this wage war. Several recall constantly switching jobs for higher pay– a practice they refer to as “chasing the money circuit.” Larry, 35, has 15 years of RV experience and is has returned to his as a group leader after being laid off for nearly a year. He reminisces:

Yeah, when I was weldin’ we chased the money circuit. I mean, whatever company was payin’ the most, that’s where we went. Me and the whole crew. I mean, I had a good group of guys that we worked with, and if we were at work one day and caught wind that down the street they were payin’ two dollars more an hour, at lunchtime we were gone. We were there.
This practice was common to RV work culture, and every worker interviewed made mention of it. Though Donna, 53, didn’t chase the money circuit herself, her ex-husband was an RV worker that actively engaged in the practice. She explains that even a rumor of higher pay elsewhere prompted many to leave their jobs: “You know, if you talked to somebody and they said, “Oh yeah, I hear out at the Woodland Lakes plant they’re bringing home 1200 dollars a week,” Boom! In you go! There you are.” As workers moved from job to job for better treatment or higher wages, manufacturers struggled to keep their plants fully staffed. Nathan, 49, recalls the staffing challenge posed by high worker mobility:

When I worked at White Mountain, every year it was at least 100 percent turnover rate, if not more. They started years ago with a hiring sign ... It was up constantly, permanently. I mean, just, “Now Hiring” – winter, summer, whenever. Because of that turnover rate. Not necessarily because we didn’t slow down a little in the winter, but because of the turnover rate.

Though a serious obstacle for employers, the tight labor market was a great resource for workers. William, who was both worker and supervisor during the industry boom explains: “That’s why the pay was higher, because they did have the advantage over the employers, because the employer had a harder time finding ... he had to pay high to get the good help.” This was, according to many, an ideal environment for workers. Howard explains, “It was kind of an unofficial labor union, back in the old days. Because people had power, like I said … if one company wasn’t treating people right, you couldn’t get anybody to work there.” This individual empowerment made the RV industry an appealing place to work because it gave workers a significant autonomy in their working lives. Larry explains, “If you were a good worker, you could pretty much do any damn thing you wanted.”

This “employee’s market” was part and parcel of Elkhart’s prevailing individualism and entrepreneurialism and helped define “good times.” This environment, characterized by autonomy, secure jobs, and high income shaped RV workers’ worlds by influencing the ways
they lived, spent, and thought about their futures.

**Consumption: “We was working so hard, and we wanted to enjoy it”**

Descriptions of life during "good times" touch on similar themes. Many note that a "work hard, play hard" philosophy prevailed in these years. The RV boom meant that production lines were running faster than ever and workers were building record numbers of units. The acceleration of work inside the plant was matched by an acceleration of life outside the factory walls. Indeed, the most common descriptor of life during the industry boom is “fast.” As Karen, 38, puts it, “Life was ... because it was so fast. It seemed so fast. The work, good money, running ... it was all so fast.” Accounts of life in “good times” paint a picture of big checks, big spending, drug use, and a life orientation geared towards the present.

With RV orders on the rise, daily labor became even more grueling. At the same time, however, workers enjoyed higher-than-ever weekly paychecks. It was common for a production worker on the bonus/piece rate system (as most RV workers were) to bring home between $900 and $1800 a week. This is a considerable sum in Elkhart, where the cost of living is low. Despite earning substantial amounts of money each week, many explain that they and/or their co-workers were “living paycheck to paycheck.” Susan, 58, recalls, “I can tell you that in the good times in RV’s ... I know that a very large percentage of the factory workers needed their paycheck on Friday, and they made good money.” The spending habits that caused workers to live a week-to-week, paycheck-to-paycheck existence were a prevalent part of the culture of the industry heyday. As Richard says, “When you make $1500 a week, you lived the $1500 a week…”

Workers grew accustomed to large paychecks and the lifestyles they enabled. Higher-than-ever discretionary income was spent on dining out, homes, cars, boats, motorcycles, and other goods. Constance, 69, has been in sewing at Woodland Hills RV’s for over eighteen years.
Though she was laid off and out of work for almost a year, she was called back to work two months before we spoke. Drawing upon her lengthy experience in the industry and the local community, she points to an unfinished house up the road from hers and explains that its owner started building it when he was employed at a large RV manufacturer, but was unable to finish it because he had been laid off. She says, “I know that lots of people in the RV industry, when you’re making $1200 a week, you buy a nice house … Or have a new truck, or two new vehicles.” All workers interviewed had stories of big-spending co-workers, and many also acknowledged that they themselves had overspent in “good times.”

Anita, 43, and her husband Mike, 44, now both laid-off, reflect on their past lifestyle. Anita admits: “We’re just as guilty as everyone else … we bought the toys.” Mike agrees, adding, “Spoil the shit out of the kids at Christmas, every year we did.” Sam acknowledges his own “work hard, play hard” mentality: “I made my share of mistakes too, because I was used to living the good life … years when I was making $60 or $70 thousand, I got used to that lifestyle and I had all the toys and everything.” Many echoed Sam’s sentiments, and the prevalence of this common account make it apparent that big spending and consumerism were common features of RV worker lives in “good times.”

Another component of worker culture in “good times” was widespread drug use. Sean expresses what all those interviewed agree is common knowledge about the role of drugs in the RV industry:

There is extensive drug use in the RV industry … Some of the places where they ran extremely high numbers everyday, those people went in at 4 o’clock in the morning and they worked till probably noon or one o’clock in the afternoon and they humped… Methamphetamine, cocaine, marijuana, it’s all part of it.

Many explain that drug use was the only way to survive the early days, hard work, and long hours that were standard at the height of the industry boom. Stimulants use was widespread because, as one worker puts it, they “kept you up and kept you going hard.” Jody, 28, recalls,
“You could yawn and somebody would shove something in your face ... They’d offer you something to keep you up.” Several recall witnessing co-workers use meth or cocaine in the break room, bathroom, and, according to more than one account, on the production floor. Workers explain that management usually either ignored the drug use, or according to many, engaged in it themselves.

Several manufacturers, including the area’s largest, did not drug test employees. In plants that did, management routinely found ways around random testing, as Sam recalls: “The person that was gonna get drug tested got the heads up so if he was somebody that did drugs, he managed to bring in somebody else’s pee.” Stimulants helped workers keep up with increasingly fast and difficult work, and management didn’t bother to address the issue because, as Luke, 33, notes, “If you get that stuff done quicker, that’s all they’re worried about.”

Drug use was not restricted to work, and many recall what they refer to as “running” (using large quantities of drugs and alcohol) all weekend. Sharon, 41, discusses her experiences:

A lot of people are hung over, they’ve been up partying all night, doing their drugs on like a four or five day binge of meth, you know ... You go, you work hard, you kill yourself, and then you go and you drink or do your drugs or whatever it is and run all weekend. We all did it.

“Running” was unexceptional, and it consumed a substantial portion of income. A number of people recall that the expense of “running” was a major reason they or their co-workers were living “paycheck to paycheck” even while bringing home large weekly checks. Sharon explains, “A lot of people, their mission was, you know, get that big paycheck and get those drugs for the next week or at least the weekend. And that’s where the money went.” Drug use was such a profoundly common phenomenon that many echo 51-year-old Helen’s observation that “if they were to fire all the drug users, they won’t have no workers.” Living “fast” through exuberant spending, drug use, and weekend “running” was not unusual. And, as many remark, they were living so fast that they never expected to slow down.
Almost all those interviewed express that they had believed that “good times” would never end. Though RV sales (and, in turn, weekly pay) did fluctuate, mass layoffs had not occurred in at least 30 years. This stability furnished a confidence in the industry and a firm belief that jobs and high incomes would not disappear. Sam confirms: “If you would have told me ten or fifteen years ago that things would be like this, I would have said you’re crazy.” This faith encouraged a present-focused orientation that was unconcerned with the future. Workers did not save or invest—they could do these things later. The “work hard, play hard” philosophy prevalent in RV work culture emphasized that it was important to enjoy the immediate rewards of one’s efforts. As Larry explains, “We was working so hard, and we wanted to enjoy it ... We thought we could always put it up later. We wanted to do this or that first.” Karen recalls her own present-orientation:

So, you know, your checks was like 900 bucks a week. And you know, you’re living like, who cares about an overdraft? Overdraft fees when I was working ... There would be months when I’d have, you know, you get your monthly statement. You got $300 in overdraft fees. Oh well, who cares?! I’m getting 800 bucks every week! It was just—you had it, so you spent it.

Because workers believed that their next big paycheck would always be just a week away, they were unconcerned with saving or investing for the future. Howard explains, “We was living from paycheck to paycheck because we knew every week we’d have a new one.” This “fast” lifestyle and present-orientation came at the expense of planning for the future. It was a tradeoff that would prove to have serious consequences.

Though not all workers embodied the “fast” ethos of the time, all recognize that it was a common part of RV work culture. Many express regret at living so “fast,” particularly in light of the sudden and catastrophic industry downturn. Others concede that they were foolish to think that high pay and the widespread availability of jobs was endless. As Susan says “When you are going so fast, I don’t think you stop and really analyze what you are doing. It’s not until you are
put down in this treading water ... Then that makes you re-analyze your situation.” The economic crash and subsequent RV slowdown brought the fast pace of life in “good times” to a screeching halt. Ralph reflects:

Yeah, people were living well above their means. And everybody’s done that, and it’s not a good thing, but it’s not a bad thing, either. But it kind of just crept up on us out of the night, maybe…And it just kind of threw a punch at us and we weren’t ready or expecting that.

UNDERSTANDING ELKHART’S ENTREPRENEURIALISM IN “GOOD TIMES”

Elkhart’s prevalent entrepreneurialism can be seen as manifest in the practice of “job hopping” during good times. Though the tight labor market minimized the danger of unemployment, workers who quit a job before securing another were engaging in employment entrepreneurialism. Free from staid organizational commitments or structures, they moved around in pursuit of better things. By embarking on a quest for better jobs (either by quitting or demanding better conditions), these workers embodied drive, enterprise, and a measure of risk—all components of entrepreneurialism. In fact, accounts of “job hopping” evoke the same themes that the RV itself symbolizes—adventure, ambition and mobility. In addition, Elkhart’s strong individualism can be seen as manifest in the means workers used to improve their jobs. These workers activated their individual positions of power to obtain easy hiring policies, better working conditions, and higher wages. These were not concessions won through union organization or collective channels. Rather, they were the result of workers exercising their individual power to choose where to work.

Entrepreneurial values also appear as a powerful influence on lifestyles and behaviors during “good times.” The individualistic perspective, which views the right to pursue happiness and fulfillment for oneself as sacred, motivated workers to combine high incomes and personal freedom to pursue satisfaction through consumption. Big spending and consumerism both produced and reinforced an environment in which individuals consumed in order to maximize
personal happiness. Spending on luxury items, entertainment, and other goods contributed to the pursuit of the independent self. Prevalent individualism also influenced drug use in “good times.” Much of this drug use was motivated by a need to keep up with increasingly difficult work rather than by the pursuit of individual pleasure. However, the high autonomy that workers enjoyed on the job did influence their drug use behavior. Using meth or cocaine on the production floor or in the break room and extracting lenient drug testing policies from management reinforced individualism. And though drugs were most often a means to keep up with work, workers did frequently acknowledge individualistic motivations for their own and their co-worker’s drug use. The desire for personal pleasure was a force that motivated weekend “running.” As Karen explains, “I did it because I wanted to ... I had fun, so why not? Who cares, you know? It didn’t matter.”

Far less prevalent than the individualism manifest in “fast” living, entrepreneurialism was nonetheless a feature of life in “good times.” In particular, two characteristics upon which the entrepreneurial spirit relies—hard work and risk—greatly influenced lifestyle choices. Many viewed stimulant use as simply part of what it took to be a hard worker. Jody notes, “You did [drugs] because that’s just what you had to do. You just had to work harder and faster.” The Elkhart community’s high valuation of hard work and its long tradition of entrepreneurial success contributed to an environment in which workers felt they could not fall short. In addition, by engaging in risky consumption-based “paycheck-to-paycheck” living and “running,” workers behaved as enterprising individuals.

Their emphasis on consumption over investment and immediate gratification over savings was a break with prescribed standards from the past. Indeed, these workers used consumption to fashion their own lives and assert themselves in the market. Though most were
not practicing enterprise entrepreneurialism and starting their own RV companies, they were engaging in self- and consumer-entrepreneurialism. Just as with descriptions of “job hopping,” accounts of “fast” living evoke enterprise themes of adventure and ambition. Ultimately, then, the “work hard, play hard” philosophy embraced by RV workers during the industry’s boom both reinforced and facilitated entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial values. During “good times,” the “work hard” part of the prevalent ethos bolstered individuals’ visions of themselves as enterprising agents that worked hard to navigate the industry and develop their skills. Further, this hard work resulted in the financial rewards that allowed workers to “play hard” and engage in a consumption-driven enterprise of the self. In spending on luxury items, entertainment, and other goods, consumption was the means these workers used to pursue and develop independent selves. Shopping and spending allowed individuals to use purchasing choices as a means to fashion their lives and build their identities. In this way, they acted to assert themselves as active, consumptive participants in the free market.

As a place where garage sales and high school football games are ubiquitous parts of community culture and where locals value family, god, and country, Elkhart is little different from countless areas of the U.S. Like many, the people of Elkhart work hard and embrace core American values they see as central to the American dream. What is special about Elkhart, as any resident is quick to point out, is its enduring entrepreneurialism. The area’s master status as a breeding ground for entrepreneurial innovation and success speaks to its powerful embrace of enterprise. Although its identity has been grounded in traditional business-oriented definitions of entrepreneurship, elements of enterprise transcend industry and inform multiple parts of community life. Entrepreneurial values of individualism, risk, flexibility, work, and consumption are present in the local political and business realms and have shaped workers’ identities and
behavior. As a self-proclaimed entrepreneurial powerhouse, this community is an ideal setting in which to explore the dynamics of contemporary entrepreneurship. And, as the current research demonstrates, Elkhart has much to contribute to theories of enterprise society.

For the most part, enterprise society scholarship understands entrepreneurialism to be a practice of government used by economic and political authorities to manage individuals’ existence. These institutions assert mastery over less powerful actors by training them to become the enterprising subjects they need to be to survive in the free market. An example of governmentality giving rise to enterprise is the emergence of increasingly common contingency in work. The rise of the contract work relation has all but eliminated the possibility of a lifetime career with one company. Workers now have little choice but to move from one insecure job to over the course of their working life. In order to successfully navigate this precarious world of employment, they must accept risk, be flexible, and develop their human capital. Work precarity is a practice of government in that it acts on individuals by socializing them to shape themselves into independent contractors with entrepreneurial values. As this example of contract work demonstrates, theories of enterprise society contend that, overwhelmingly, power is enacted in ways that are advantageous to institutional authority and harmful to subjects.

Given this view of power, how may we make sense of Elkhart’s enterprise culture? Ostensibly, it seems as if workers’ entrepreneurial behavior inverted the power relation that characterizes neoliberal governance. During the RV boom, flexibility and risk taking enabled workers to extract better work environments, higher pay, and more autonomy from their employers. Though akin to contract workers in their moving from job to job, developing new skills, and eschewing company loyalty, RV workers did not suffer the perilous uncertainty, low wages, and lagging benefits that plagues contingent labor. Rather, entrepreneurialism made
workers more, not less, powerful. This dynamic is unexpected and appears to contradict existing understandings of enterprise society.

Upon closer examination, however, the differentiating element in Elkhart becomes clear. Local economic circumstances determined the nature of local enterprise culture. By constructing them as valuable commodities, the tight labor market gave workers a large measure of confidence and power. From this position of empowerment, employment and consumer enterprise were highly appealing pursuits that resonated with the prevalent norms and values in their community. While core community values fostered the pursuit of individualistic enterprise, ultimately, the success of one’s self enterprise was determined not by individual values and effort, but, rather, by structural conditions—a truth that becomes very evident when examining workers’ experiences in recessionary “bad times.”
CHAPTER FIVE: IN THEORY, IN REALITY - NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY IN ELKHART

A crisis not only presents an immediate challenge that has to be faced. It also provides an opportunity to address long term problems when people are willing to reconsider established conventions (Sen 2009).

On October 23, 2008, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan—acolyte of Ayn Rand, self-described “lifelong libertarian Republican,” and one of Time Magazine’s “25 People to Blame for the Financial Crisis”—spoke before the U.S. House Committee on Oversight and Government on the causes of the financial crisis. Still reeling from the passage and enactment of extremely popular TARP legislation just three weeks earlier, U.S. representatives grilled the former chairman about his time at the Fed and his failure to regulate banks and lending agencies. The session took an especially intense turn when California Representative Henry Waxman interrogated Greenspan, questioning his fundamental understanding of the world and how it works:

Waxman: “The question I have for you is, you had an ideology, you had a belief that free, competitive—and this is your statement—“I do have an ideology. My judgment is that free, competitive markets are by far the unrivaled way to organize economies...” That was your quote.

You had the authority to prevent irresponsible lending practices that led to the subprime mortgage crisis. You were advised to do so by many others. And how our whole economy is paying its price.

Do you feel that your ideology pushed you to make decisions that you wish you had not made?”

Greenspan: “Well, remember that what an ideology is, is a conceptual framework with the way people deal with reality. Everyone has one. You have to—to exist, you need an ideology. The question is whether it is accurate or not.

And what I’m saying to you is, yes, I found a flaw. I don’t know how significant or permanent it is, but I’ve been very distressed by that fact.”

Waxman: “You found a flaw in the reality...”

Greenspan: “Flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak.”

Waxman: “In other words, you found that your view of the world, your ideology, was not right, it was not working?”
Greenspan: “That is—precisely. No, that’s precisely the reason I was shocked, because I had been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well” (Waxman-Greenspan Testimony 2008).

It was a stunning exchange: One of the most influential free market economists in the world had admitted that there were serious flaws in the ideology that had informed the global economic system for the past 40 years. Far more than a mere market failure, the financial crisis was a crisis of faith. In the late fall of 2008, and masses of Americans (including Alan Greenspan) were questioning hegemonic understandings of the world and how it works. Rather than simply losing faith in specific policies or politicians within the system (a common consequence of the crashes and recessions endemic to capitalism), people were beginning to question, critique, and lose faith in the system itself. Greenspan’s testimony reflected just what an extraordinary moment in contemporary capitalism this was. It was a moment of ideological crisis: Individuals across the country, from wage laborers to lifelong proponents of capitalism, were questioning the hegemonic understanding of the free market as the natural, ideal “functioning structure that defines how the world works” (Clark and Treanor 2008) best used to order all parts of society. Economic reality had dealt a potentially lethal blow to hegemonic capitalist ideology and, for a moment, delegitimation on some level suddenly seemed possible (Della Fave 1980).

The years that have passed since Greenspan’s testimony have proven that the moment that was late 2008—a time when the national mood and culture were marked by profound outrage, skepticism, deep uncertainty about the promises of capitalism—was, indeed, a moment—a brief period of time that would pass. There has been no mass uprising against capitalist policies and practices and the U.S. economic system seems to be unaffected by the specter of equality: Income inequality has grown significantly since 2009 (Saez 2013; Appelbaum 2014; Leon 2014) and in 2012, the “gulf between the richest 1% and the rest of
America [became] the widest it's been since the Roaring '20s” (Wiseman 2013). While it’s evident that there’s little threat to the existence of stratification, closer examination reveals a growing skepticism over the acceptability of massive inequality. Polls show that Americans are angrier than ever at banks and big business (Gallup 2014a; 2014b; Rasmussen 2014), more disgusted by political leaders (Pew 2010a; 2012a; 2012b; 2013) and increasingly distrustful of both (Pew 2010a; 2010b; Rasmussen 2013; Gallup 2014a; 2014b). More and more Americans doubt the possibility of upward mobility (nearly half do not agree that hard work and determination are guarantees of success (Jones et. al 2013), and over half of the nation believes that the U.S. does not provide everyone with an equal chance to succeed (Jones et. al 2013).

Growing skepticism towards the promises of the American dream has been accompanied by increasing disenchantment with free market capitalism: In 2010, 59% of Americans agreed that the free market was the best system for the world’s future. A majority, yes, but significantly fewer than the 80% who agreed when asked in 2002. Faith in capitalism declined even more sharply among Americans earning less than $20,000 a year, falling from 76% to 44% in just one year (Rasmussen 2009; Public Opinion 2011). Approximately 6 in 10 U.S. adults believe that the nation’s economic system favors the wealthy (Pew 2012a; 2013; 2014) and of the more than 4 in 10 Americans who believe capitalism is not working, a third say it is because the system encourages greed and nearly a quarter maintain that capitalism creates poverty and lasting inequality (Jones et. al 2013).

For the first time, a majority of U.S. adults say that reducing the income gap between rich and poor is more important than encouraging free market competition (Rasmussen 2014). In fact, nearly two-thirds note that it is very or somewhat important for the federal government take action to reduce this gap, and approximately nine of ten feel that it’s very or somewhat important
for the government to increase equality of opportunity for all (Pew 2012a; 2012b; 2014). Simply put, many are no longer completely confident that capitalism is the best of all possible systems. A 2011 poll found that younger people—those between 18 and 29—feel more slightly more favorably towards socialism (49% view it positively) than they do towards capitalism (46% view it positively) (Pew 2010c; Eichler 2011). While it is important not to overstate the extent or significance of these changes—after all, nearly half do believe capitalism is best—it is also important to acknowledge that, by revealing a “...flaw in the model that...is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works” (Clark and Treanor 2008), the financial meltdown and its aftermath seem to have dealt a blow to the widespread faith in capitalist ideology that serves as the underpinning of neoliberalism writ large.

How are we to understand the nature and consequences of this apparent ideological shift? How deeply felt is this dissatisfaction with capitalism, and to what degree does it inspire individuals to engage in efforts to change the political and economic order? Is this cynicism temporary, or could it result in widespread resistance and change? Is it possible that we are witnessing the beginning of the undoing of neoliberal capitalism in the United States? As Amartya Sen notes in the quote that opens this chapter, crises often open spaces for questioning the dominant order, and, consequentially, have the potential to inspire major change.

That moments of crisis are laden with possibility is a reality recognized by leaders and thinkers of all stripes. According to Milton Friedman (1962), “Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around” (xiv). Gramsci (1971) hits on these same points in one of his discussions of crisis:

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer ‘leading’ but only ‘dominant’, exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their
traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born...(275-276).

Finding a point of agreement between theorists as disparate as Marxist Antonio Gramsci and free market capitalist Milton Friedman is a noteworthy accomplishment in itself, but it is the substance of their agreement that is particularly important: Both agree that, while a crisis may present an opportunity for dramatic social change, the ability to realize such change is entirely dependent upon the power of ideology, nature of public discourse, existence of ideas, and individuals’ willingness to consider alternatives and accept new ways of thinking. The insight that crises open doors for ideas to produce real social change is extremely important for understanding change (and the lack thereof) in post-meltdown America.

In this chapter, I look at RV workers’ perspectives on the U.S. economic system, the state, and individuals. After a brief discussion of the functions of ideology, I present a general overview of neoliberal logic before turning to Elkhart’s RV workers’ take on neoliberal ideology. Although neoliberalism has many manifestations, in this chapter I am particularly interested in exploring how workers make sense of and respond to neoliberal ideas about the economy, the state, and the individual. In addition to exploring the presence of neoliberal logic in their discussions of capitalism, the role of the state and unprecedented state interventions into the economy (bailout and stimulus legislation), I examine their explanations of poverty and feelings about the rights and responsibilities of individuals.

Workers’ discussions reveal that the financial crisis caused significant disruption in workers’ worldviews and produced an ideological distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘reality’ that informs their views of desirable and necessary state and economic action. Though this ideological rupture has inspired a degree of populism among these individuals, it has not resulted in delegitimation. Ultimately, the ideological distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘reality’ functions
to romanticize and idealize neoliberalism as ‘the way things should be’ and thus reinforces the power of neoliberal ideological hegemony.

IDEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO CRISIS

As discussed in the previous chapter, ideology is both thought and practice—not only does it influence what one thinks, it also profoundly shapes what one does. Gramsci (1971) explains that hegemonic ideologies “…have a validity which is “psychological: They “organize” human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.” (Gramsci 1971:377). The key to hegemony lays in the construction of “common sense” understandings of the world that are natural and unquestionable—ideas that are “beyond question, assumptions so deep that the very fact that they are assumptions is only rarely brought to light” (Hall, Massey, and Rustin 2013:9). As obvious, objective, “common sense” understandings, hegemony frames vision, thought, and behavior by defining what matters and what doesn’t (and explaining how/why things matter) (Ayers 2005). Hall and O’Shea (2013) explain that ideological hegemony, or “common sense,”

…is a form of ‘everyday thinking’ which offers us frameworks of meaning with which to make sense of the world. It is a form of popular, easily-available knowledge which contains no complicated ideas, requires no sophisticated argument and does not depend on deep thought or wide reading. It works intuitively, without forethought or reflection. It is pragmatic and empirical, giving the illusion of arising directly from experience, reflecting only the realities of daily life and answering the needs of ‘the common people’ for practical guidance and advice (8-9).

Thus, when effectively incorporated into social life, ideology heavily shapes one’s way of knowing, doing, and being in the world and “…constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway…” (Williams [1980] 2005:37).

Ideological hegemony works as a form of truth that individuals use to understand and navigate their worlds. Always a “response to certain problems posed by reality which are quite specific and ‘original’ in their relevance” (Gramsci 2000:326), hegemonic “common sense” draws on tradition and justifications of the existing dominant order to create meaning, solve
problems, and tackle social dilemmas and thus tends to be somewhat conservative and averse to social upheaval and change. There’s no doubt that ideology is powerful: As a form of knowledge individuals rely on to construct ideas of right and wrong and inform the actions they take (Sassoon 1984; Fantasia 1988; Ehrenreich 1990; 1999; Doukas 2003; Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009) ideology can inspire the acceptance of existing circumstances, movements for social change, and the thoughts and behaviors that fall along the wide spectrum between the two (Merton 1938; 1968; Newman 1989; 1993; Jost 2006; Knight 2006; Davidson 2007; Anderson and Singer 2008; Ball and Dagger 2008; Freeden 2013).

Given that ideology can inspire (or prevent) dramatic social change, it is important to understand the role that ideology played in Americans’ responses to the 2008 financial meltdown. Was the Greenspan experience—the sudden realization that one’s ideological understanding of reality is fundamentally flawed—a common one? Has ideological hegemony played any part in preventing (or stymying) any significant and sustained rejection of the neoliberal policies and practices that caused the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression?

Looking to existing sociological treatments of neoliberal ideological hegemony as a means of insight into the lack of populist uprising in the U.S. proves to be somewhat unhelpful. The bulk of this prominent scholarship (Seider 1974; Crouch 1997; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001; Ayers 2005; Speigel 2006; Van Arsdale 2008) locate ideological power in institutions and conceptualize it as control and/or direction of individuals. United by the general understanding that institutions control culture to elicit consent from workers, this literature presents a relatively dichotomous vision in which power is held by one group and acquiesced to by another. Given this conceptualization of power, it is not surprising that treatments of hegemonic neoliberalism in
the U.S. have largely failed to identify significant resistance to, or indeed, nuanced interpretations of neoliberal ideology. Gramscian studies of neoliberal ideology are united by a common argument that that challenges to neoliberal capitalism have not emerged because there is no existing ideology to articulate any alternatives to the dominant system. Noting that neoliberalism is a truly hegemonic discourse – to the point of disallowing any other possibilities to materialize (Gamble 2001; McKenna 2004; Ayers 2005, Morgan and Gonzales 2008)—this body of work finds that even the groups and social institutions that used to produce counter-hegemonic ideology have, in a sense, acquiesced to the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism (Crouch 1997; Bourdieu 2002).

Of course, the overwhelming institutional focus of sociological treatments of neoliberal ideology could very well have produced a problematic blindness to existing ideological inconsistencies, resistances, and articulations of alternative worldviews as manifest in individuals’ thoughts and practices. Though they offer valuable insight into how leaders and elites form and promote neoliberal ideology, most studies fail to analyze how these messages are received and interpreted by those they are targeted at. This lack of balance is a significant hindrance to producing useful knowledge of ideology as a lived social construction with real consequences for daily life. Aware of the necessity of examining those receiving ideological messages, Gramsci (1993) maintained that genuine understanding must account for individuals’ lived experiences. He explains,

Books and magazines only offer general ideas, sketches (more or less successful) of general currents in the world’s life. But they cannot give the immediate, direct, vivid impression of the lives of Peter, Paul, and John, of single, real individuals, and unless one understands them, one cannot understand what is being universalized and generalized (233).

Studies that neglect to examine those on the receiving end of institutional messages make the flawed assumption that ideology is received in a uniform manner. Such an assumption of
simple, uniform ideological acceptance denies the agency of individuals to rationalize, criticize, and interpret what they are told. This denial of agency is one of the glaring weaknesses of contemporary conceptions of neoliberal ideology (Kalekin-Fishman 2008). Because “hegemony is an incomplete political and cultural project with an uneven impact on popular knowledge and practices” (Morgan and Gonzales 2008: 220), insight into the nature and consequences of neoliberalism must examine how individuals interpret dominant ideological messages. Employing Gramsci’s conceptualization in my exploration of the core tenets of neoliberal thought among Elkhart’s RV, I seek to build deeper understanding of how those on the receiving end interpret and respond to hegemonic ideology.

**NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY: THE ECONOMY**

**Free Market Liberty**

All forms of liberal economic thought define liberty as the freedom to pursue one’s interests in the free market. According to Milton Friedman (1962), “…freedom in economic arrangements is itself a component of freedom broadly understood, so economic freedom is an end in itself” (8). In this way, freedom is conceptualized as complete economic sovereignty in the market. In the market, one is ‘free to choose’ the life they want. Free market capitalism is, according to this perspective, natural, efficient, rational, and the best means of ensuring individual freedom. The Sharon Statement—the founding document of the ‘Young Americans for Freedom,’ a conservative group committed to limited state and free markets, and a core neoliberal text—asserts “…the market economy, allocating resources by the free play of supply and demand, is the single economic system compatible with the requirements of personal freedom and constitutional government, and [] is at the same time the most productive supplier of human needs” (“The Sharon Statement”). This logic views market exchange as “a promoter of
individual virtue and interpersonal cooperation, the bulwark of personal liberty and political freedom, and the mechanism by which human creativity can be unleashed and its products made available to society at large” (Fourcade and Healy 2007:8). In essence, free market capitalism is a natural guarantor of human liberty and the best economic system possible.

According to this hegemonic perspective, free market capitalism is the best economic system, and moreover, the only rational and free economic system possible. The fall of the USSR was said to be the end of all challenges to the capitalist economic system. It was, as Frances Fukuyama (1989) famously noted, “the end of history…the unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism” (“The End of History”). Popular nonfiction books by preeminent journalists, economists, and political scientists noted that capitalism was the only system that could unite the globe (Barber 1996; Huntington 1998; Friedman 1999). Indeed, as the millennium approached and economic globalization intensified – capitalism became a central force in nearly every nation in the world. Global financial institutions and trade organizations gave nations little choice but to accept neoliberal economic and political policies—if they didn’t undergo significant marketization and reform, they would be shut out of world markets and cut off from lending and trading partners. No nation states have engaged in serious and sustained efforts to create or implement alternative forms of economic since 1990, and capitalism has become, essentially, a global norm.

The ascendance of capitalism has been so complete that it is, in many areas, taken for granted. As Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant (1999) insightfully pointed out, capitalism is “…nowadays accepted with resignation as the inevitable outcome of the evolution of nations, when it is not celebrated with a sheepish enthusiasm eerily reminiscent of the infatuation for America that the Marshall Plan aroused in a devastated Europe half a century ago” (43). The
assumed default of order in most debates and discussions about economic policy: Instead of asking if capitalism should order society, leading thinkers today tend to ask what kind of capitalism should order society. Mitchell Dean (2008) explains,

The neoliberal economic agenda – of eliminating government deficits and inflation, sharply cutting back government spending, deregulating labor and financial markets, and opening national economies to free trade and multinational capital investments – has become so dominant throughout the world over the past generation that even thinking through serious alternatives presents itself as a daunting task (45).

The triumph of capitalism has been so complete that UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s comment that “there really is no alternative” (“Press Conference”) to capitalism has become a social reality. Elkhart’s RV workers uniformly agree with the hegemonic ideological definition of capitalism as best form of economy and the only system compatible with human liberty.

“It’s the best system in the world!”

Elkhart’s RV workers largely agree that capitalism is the best of all possible economic systems. As Gerald puts it, “With a free economy, the sky’s the limit!” Though not all workers share Gerald’s powerful enthusiasm, most agree that the capitalist system offers the greatest number of opportunities for those who are persistent and willing to work hard. According to Bob, 55, those who criticize the free market are individuals who have little ambition. He explains, “People who think that the market is bad are mostly lazy and don’t wanna work for anything. Free enterprise and working to make it on your own is the only way you have a chance to succeed in this world—it’s the American dream and all…”

Like most of the RV workers I interviewed, Bob is deeply committed to the belief that the free market economy is the only system in which any individual can work hard and become successful. Shared by the majority of RV workers I spoke with, this understanding is deeply rooted in their broader perspectives on the U.S. and the freedom and opportunity that lay at the
heart of the American Dream. Dennis, 44, explains, “That’s part of what capitalism is—a free economy and stuff. It’s the best system in the world, and it’s what made America so strong.”

Discussing the problem of a too-powerful state that impedes economic growth, Rodney, 49, concludes that America was “founded on…individual freedom”—a freedom made possible by the free market economy. Though more detailed than others’, Patricia’s explanation of the relationship between capitalism and the American way of life are illustrative of the understanding shared by most RV workers I spoke with. Noting that “Free enterprise is what made this country and it’s one thing that will pull this country out of the recession and not bring about another recession,” she explains:

To live in a country that offers opportunities to make your own way, to become debt free, to live a life that’s comfortable enough that you can help other people. And to also have a decent retirement, you know. But it’s the opportunity overall that makes America a great country. Anything here is possible. Anything. And this is the only country in the world—people die to get into this country everyday. This is the only country in the world where free enterprise is so precious that it literally draws people just for that slim hope of that future accomplishment.

Though some of those I spoke with may be unhappy with specific economic policies and practices, none deny (or even seriously question) the value of free market capitalism. According to these workers, even when the economy falters, there can be no doubt that the capitalist system is best. Bob says, “And I know it’s hard sometimes, especially now, but it’s a hell of a lot better than being told what to do for work and being paid the same amount as somebody who works half as hard as you do.” Like Bob, all of those I spoke with affirm that capitalism is best because it reflects and reproduces the fundamental American traditions of opportunity and individual liberty.

“One stands for freedom, and the other one…”

While the workers I spoke with have many ideas to improve the economy, their ideas entail modifying, rather than transforming or completely overhauling, the economic order. All of the workers I spoke with express a preference for capitalism and a firm belief that alternative
forms of economic order such as communism and socialism are inferior, ineffective, and, above all, threatening to freedom and the American way of life. Workers’ comments on collectivist economic systems include descriptions of widespread deprivation and poverty. Jeffrey explains that people in communist countries had to wait in “bread lines that were hours long” and “couldn’t do anything without state approval.” Some say that such societies crush the innovation and ambition that have made the U.S. successful. A number of people point out that communism has proven to be a failure time and again. Explaining that communism is unnatural and doomed to failure because it creates a dependent population unwilling to work and produce, Gerald says, “It is not supposed to be that way, and you cannot sustain it. You cannot rob Peter to pay Paul indefinitely. Because Paul’s going to quit.” The overwhelming majority of those I spoke with echo Gerald’s perspective, noting that, in addition to dis-incentivizing work and making people lazy, communist/socialist societies are unfair and un-free.

Commenting on the problems associated with communism, a small handful of workers say that they believe President Obama is working to undermine U.S. capitalism in favor of a socialist or communist economy. Nick, 48, says, “It looks to me like there’s an awful lot more going on there than a free enterprise system. And that’s one thing that worries me about Obama. I just don’t trust him. He wants to make it socialist.” Dean, 33, agrees that President Obama is a socialist, and, moreover, believes that the major political parties in the U.S. essentially reflect a capitalist (Republicans)/communist (Democrats) divide. He explains, “Well one stands for freedom and the other one, they’re basically communist up to a certain extent…some to a full extent.”

In addition a small handful of workers who mention explicit suspicion that President Obama is a socialist or communist, just over one fifth of those I spoke with say that they worry
that the Obama administration’s policies are leading the U.S. down a dangerous path to a non-capitalist society. For these workers, the impending transition to a collective economy is a real and deeply felt threat. Detailing how earlier generations of his family suffered deprivation and fear in Stalinist Russia, Jeffrey, 61, relates their experiences to contemporary events in the U.S., noting, “…But here now the government tries to take over everything where it’s gonna be almost like Russia again you know, it’s gonna be a socialist country. And before too long, if we keep going like this, we’re not gonna own anything…” The specter of communism is, according to Dwayne, an imminent threat to the values and freedoms he defended during the five years he served as a Marine before starting in the RV industry. He says, “I just think if we just continue down this road of socialist type path almost even like communistic type and I think Americans love their freedom and I know these people are willing to die for. I have stepped over their bodies before and it is just kind of sad.”

Given their belief that capitalism furnishes freedom and opportunity, it is hardly surprising that these individuals have no interest in or respect for other economic possibilities. For these workers, capitalism has proven to be a fertile ground for dreams and ambition—it gave birth to the industry that most of them have labored in for decades. Moreover, as I discuss in the next chapter, before the financial crisis, the open, competitive nature of the capitalist system enabled them to act entrepreneurially and maximize their abilities to bring home steady and relatively high incomes. When compared with the “bread lines” poverty, and control they associate with collectivist economies, capitalism is clearly better. In fact, their certainty that the free market system is objectively superior serves to effectively eliminate the questions, doubts, and structural critiques necessary for serious consideration of other economic forms. For Elkhart’s RV workers, there truly is no alternative to capitalism.
Markets and Fairness

Neoliberal ideology holds that capitalism is an inherently fair—in fact, the only truly fair—economic system. The premise of fairness is of critical importance: It is a core part of the American Dream that “all Americans have a reasonable chance to success as they define it—material or otherwise—through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment through success” (Hochschild 1995:xvii). Cognizant that the idea of “fairness” was extremely salient in the U.S. and had served as the ideological underpinning that legitimized Keynesian economics, Hayek (1991) defended capitalism against accusations of unfairness, explaining:

The pursuit of gain is held in bad repute because it does not have as its aim the visible benefit of others and may be successfully guided by purely selfish motives. Yet the source of the strength of the market order is that it uses the immediate concerns of individuals to make them serve needs that are more important than they can know…His efforts may not be the most beneficial to his immediate neighbors – and for that reason may not make him popular among them – but he will serve society at large much better than he could in any other way (330).

In general, hegemonic thought argues that free markets are truly fair because they are inherently neutral and value-free. The market is an open arena for exchange that rewards value—it is a means for individuals to succeed based on merit, and all individuals have the same opportunity to succeed in a free market system. As Friedman (1980) so famously explained, “A society that puts equality—in the sense of equality of outcome—ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom…. On the other hand, a society that puts freedom first will, as a happy by-product, end up with both greater freedom and greater equality” (148).

By maintaining that the market’s neutral means of indicating value will ensure that individuals fare according to their own effort, this philosophy paints capitalist economics as entirely fair and, at the same time, casts a shadow of suspicion on all other institutions as being unfair. In this way, then, neoliberals are able to depict the state as partisan. Dominated by individuals and specific individual interests, the state and other social institutions are less free and more skewed than the free market. The implication of this ideological insight is that it
"call[s] into question any and all collective structures that could serve as an obstacle to the logic of the pure market…” (Bourdieu 1998:3). Collective social forms—labor unions, work groups, political parties, and activist social organizations—are automatically discounted inherently political and therefore inferior to a wholly impartial free market that furnishes equal opportunity for all. While they agree that capitalism is fair, a significant proportion of the workers I spoke with point out that it is a system that is fairer in theory than in reality.

“It's supposed to all just kind of come out in the wash, eventually”

All of the RV workers I spoke with agree that capitalism is an inherently fair economic system. In fact, as he reflects on the inherently equitable nature of the capitalist system, Gerald, a 59-year old RV worker who has recently returned to part-time work after an extended layoff, makes comments that could be taken for those made by any prominent neoliberal economist. He explains:

I mean, you could say a lot of things about it in a republic…the concept is that people best govern themselves. And it is the people, the individuals should be allowed to be free to do as much or as little as they choose to do with their life. And that includes the economics of their life. Capitalism’s not a bad word; it’s really a good thing. A very good thing. The more that [the government] interfere[s] with it, the less freedom and the less opportunity that we have. And a republic is about freedom of opportunity and equality of opportunity not in the literal.

Though his reflection is somewhat more detailed and passionate than comments made by others, Gerald is not alone in his basic view of capitalism as a valuable, natural, and fair economic order. When asked if whether he feels that capitalism is the most fair economic system possible, Nick, 48, answers, “Definitely… but that’s the whole idea of free enterprise. It’s supposed to kind of play out in my best interests. With capitalism, it's supposed to all just kind of come out in the wash, eventually...like the best for everyone– you know.” Workers ultimately agree that capitalism is fair because it rewards hard working individuals and gives them the opportunity to succeed. Peter, 18, explains,
See, I personally am a capitalist; I always try to go out and better myself, and if somebody’s in my way, naturally I’m going to try to outdo them, and in the business world, that’s what it’s like, it’s just dog-eat-dog, and you’re always trying to get ahead of everybody else. And if you work hard, you are rewarded for your work—that only happens under capitalism.

Many believe capitalism to be fair precisely because it is neutral. According to these workers, competition is inherently apolitical because everyone has an opportunity to excel, and those that do are fairly rewarded for their work. And, in turn, those individuals and operations that are less successful are fairly rewarded for their efforts as well. Objective market competition determines success, work, and compensation under capitalism—a structure that is, according to some, fair because it is not dominated by any particular individual agenda. Gary’s discussion of inherent neutrality of capitalism illustrates this commonly shared vision of market freedom and equitability:

Well, I don’t, I don’t think businesses should actually look out for somebody, because there’s so many people they just take advantage of things as well. Steal from work or just, blow all their money that they do earn.... You know, businesses trade you money for your time. So, I mean, you’re hired just as well, you have to do the right job. I don’t think it’s their job to look out for you, because you’re the one that runs your life, you’re the one that buys that, you know, that 100,000 dollar house vs. the 50,000 dollar one.

“It doesn’t necessarily play out that way in reality”

Although they uniformly agree that capitalism is, in fact, a fair system, approximately half of the RV workers who spoke with me note that it is fairer in theory than in reality. This shared awareness of the tangible separation between principle and reality is well reflected in Nick’s note that capitalism is “supposed” to be equitable and best for all. Brent, 25, and laid off after two-and-a-half years working as a driver and swingman for Redman, explains that the way the economy is designed to function and the way that it functions in reality are not one in the same: “I think the economy should be built on, you know, free enterprise and the hard work of the people who build businesses themselves. It should be hardworking Americans creating jobs and going to jobs everyday, doing their best is what made our country strong in the first place.”
Explaining that corruption and dishonest business practices have created discontinuity, Brent continues, “But that’s not what happens anymore, it seems. The big corporate guys and government guys do things together that make it unfair, so that they get richer and more powerful. So it’s not everyone making it on his own like it is supposed to be, because some guys are working the system.”

Married couple Sharon, 41, and Jack, 43, both laid off from the RV plant where they initially met, echo Brent’s assertion that economic rewards and efforts are not fairly aligned. According to Jack, “Everything is messed up because people got too greedy. So now the important people, like teachers and police, aren’t valued like they should be. Even though they are important...” Although she believes that the wealthy do work hard, Sharon feels that they are given unfair advantages and overpaid. She explains, “The money is just…it’s way out of whack … It’s not fair because [the wealthy] know people and they get special tax breaks and help from other rich people, so things aren’t as equal as they are supposed to be.” Michael’s reflection on the nature of the capitalist system is representative of the comments made by those who feel a disjuncture between the way capitalism is designed to work and the way it works in reality. He says, “There’s the thing of it. Yeah, it’s pretty fair, to tell you the truth. When it’s workin’ like it should, it’s the fairest system there is—but it doesn’t necessarily play out that way in reality.”

**NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY: THE INDIVIDUAL**

All forms of liberalism are united by a core belief in the sanctity and natural freedom of the individual. Nothing more than a collection of individuals who have come together, society does not have supreme moral sovereignty greater than that of its constituent parts (Hunt 2002). Liberal thought grants “moral primacy of the person against the claims of any social
collectivity…” (Gray 1995:xii). Summarizing the foundational understanding at the heart of liberalism, John Stuart Mill ([1859] 2002) explains,

> The only freedom, which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own food in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental and spiritual. Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest (10).

In general, liberalism holds that individuals are the makers of their worlds, and should be as free as possible to live in the way that they see fit. While citizenship does require some inevitable limitations of freedom, these limitations should be as minimal as possible. A core belief upon which the U.S. was founded, this liberal understanding of individual freedom continues to influence nearly every conceivable aspect of U.S. culture (Krugman 2009).

**Enterprising Individuals**

Expanding upon and modifying the classical liberal view of man as an economic being (homo economicus), neoliberal thought defines man as an economic, entrepreneurial being. The understanding that humans are fundamentally free, creative competitive creatures is a foundational tenet of neoliberalism (Foucault 2007; Winnubst 2012). As discussed in the preceding chapter, neoliberal ideology holds that individuals in contemporary society are engaged in an enterprise of the self, constantly seeing to discover, improve, and change in a lifelong quest to realize and maximize their human capital. All individuals are solely responsible for the outcome of their life-enterprises, and success is measured in the marketplace.

One who invests in their human capital and uses it in the marketplace to realize great economic returns is a successful entrepreneur of the self. In turn, an individual and who is unable to provide for his or her own basic needs is generally considered a to be a failing or failed enterprise (Gamble 2001; Allen 2004; Mitrocic 2005; Fourcade and Healy 2007; Gill 2012). This individualistic, entrepreneurial definition of success and failure is a crucial component of the
neoliberal ideological contention that markets are inherently fair. For capitalism to be understood as a fair system in which everybody has an equal chance at success, it is necessary to explain achievement and failure in individual terms. In this ideological worldview, then, economic prosperity is a triumph of individual risk, hard work, morality, and integrity—the components of any successful enterprise. Of course, if success is an individual entrepreneurial triumph, failure must be understood as a result of individual deficiencies and poor enterprising behavior. Because the capitalist system is a neutral and fair arena in which all entrepreneurs have an equal chance to realize their abilities, unsuccessful individuals (the poor) have nobody to blame but themselves (Bourdieu 1998; McGuigan 2005; Mitrocic 2005).

Neoliberal enterprise ideology and explanations of economic success and failure tap into the longstanding and highly influential American meritocracy ideology. Studies show that Americans have long believed that the U.S. is essentially a meritocracy in which individuals can earn some degree of success through hard work. In fact, “For the most part, Americans associate success with merit rather than with luck, birth, or criminality…For one thing, they admire success…For another, [they’ are extraordinarily optimistic about their own chances in life” (Mickelthwait and Wooldridge 2004:307). Likewise, the understanding of poverty as resulting from personal failings has also been a core American belief for a very long time. The neoliberal integration of individualistic explanations of poverty “roots poverty in welfare dependency and individual deficiency (especially with regard to work motivation, discipline, and skills) rather than in the structural dynamics of capitalism…” (Morgen and Gonzales 2008:221).

There is a powerful morality embedded in the neoliberal ideology of individual entrepreneurial responsibility and success: Not only are many of the traits and capacities associated with successful enterprise (self-control, diligence, a strong work ethic, self-
knowledge, interpersonal skills, etc.) characteristics that have long been defined as “virtuous,” but the idea of enterprise itself is defined as a moral responsibility of all people (Gill 2012). This morality frames all work (and work on the self) as a worthy, moral pursuit (Rittersporn 2009). Moreover, neoliberal ideology retains and reinforces the equation of economic success and morality that has long been central to American understandings of achievement (Newman 1989; Gill 2012), as Fourcade and Healy (2007) explain: “…in modern societies money is central to the evaluation of the moral worth of individuals. The careful management of one’s wealth is not just economically rational but an index of one’s moral responsibility” (20).

Individuals who have neglected their responsibilities, those not engaged in active enterprise (the unemployed) or who are failed entrepreneurs (the poor) are immoral or of uncertain morality and thus don’t warrant much consideration or respect. Neoliberal morality legitimates an understanding “that everybody deserves the treatment he can buy and that the redemption of the poor is work, if he has the luck to have a job, whatever it pays” (Rittersporn 2009:166). The ideological explanation of success and failure as products of individual enterprise (and the morality inhered in this ideology) remains extremely prominent in the U.S.—even among those suffering the consequences of a systemic failure of capitalism.

“A lot of the poor people, they bring it on themselves”

In their discussions of inequality and poverty in the U.S., all of the workers I spoke with express individualistic explanations of poverty, and slightly more than three quarters point to individual failings as the sole cause of financial hardship. Noting that poverty is largely a result of poor decision-making and lack of effort, they say that the “down and out” (as one worker puts it) are largely to blame for their suffering. Laziness or a lacking work ethic is one commonly cited explanations of financial failure—just over a third mention this individual failing as a
primary cause of struggle, noting that most individuals’ economic hardships can be attributed to a simple unwillingness to work. Dwayne explains, “For the most part I think it’s [the poor] just don’t have the same work ethic that most people do. They don’t work hard or even work at all because basically, they’re pretty much lazy. And that’s why they don’t have nothin’.” Shelley makes a similar assertion, noting that poverty is caused by “Laziness. Plain and simple. They’d rather sleep or watch TV or just live off whoever they can get to support them instead of going to work like the rest of us.” Noting that he has several family members who are “straight across the board unwilling to work,” Ralph points out that working doesn’t necessarily mean that a person isn’t lazy, explaining,

Most poor people are just poor because they don’t have the education and they don’t have the ambition or will to go out and get a better job. One of the guys I worked with—he’s 23—and his wife’s expecting their third child. Neither one of them have graduated high school. She’s only went to the 10th grade, or 9th grade, I’m sorry. It’s just — some people are...a lot of the poor people, they bring it on themselves. They get locked into something like that and that’s where they stay because they don’t have the drive to change it.

Some explain that most poor people aren’t necessarily lazy as much as they are unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to earn a living and support themselves. Brent says, “A lot of poor people, I wouldn’t say they’re lazy…. They’re just not willing. Either one, they are lazy, or two, they’re not willing to accept a job for 10 dollars an hour like I am. Because even though things are tough, you can get a job if you really try. But they won’t do it.” Arthur agrees, noting that many people “don’t think they should have to do certain jobs.” He explains, “You’d be surprised that they got so much attitude. You know, a lot of poor people, they don’t wanna take a shitty minimum wage job. They don’t think it’s worth their time. What I wanna know is, why do you think you deserve a better job than everybody else? You’re poor! You don’t got anything going!” Making a similar observation, Constance points out that “most poor people, they’re just as healthy and normal as you and me. They can work. They just think they’re too good to. So they complain that there’s nothing out there, but they just refuse to take work that they don’t
want to do.” Kyle’s comments are representative of the general explanation made by workers who cite laziness or an unwillingness to work as the primary cause of poverty. He says,

It’s because they’re just not workers. It really is. If you look at most poor people’s work record, you can tell right away why they’re poor. They don’t work! Some are too lazy and think it’s everybody else’s job to do the work for them. They got no motivation whatsoever. Some think they’re too good to work and that they shouldn’t have to. Some will quit a job right away if they don’t like it. It comes down to work ethic. They’re not willing to do the work it takes to make it. The truth is, if you are a worker, you’ll take any job you can get and you’ll work your ass off. And you won’t be poor. You may not be rich, mind you, but you won’t be poor if you work. That’s just the truth.

“They just aren’t careful and they don’t care”

A large number of workers identify personal irresponsibility as a source of impoverishment—in fact, this was the most commonly cited cause of poverty among workers overall: Just under two thirds of those I spoke with explain that the poor are wasteful and bad with money. These workers say that people in poverty have what Shelley identifies as “no sense with money.” Common to these explanations is the understanding that poor people tend to live beyond their means and spend wastefully. Shelley says, “They [the poor] waste all their money and then wonder why they don’t got any! I mean it. I seen it all the time when I worked at the gas station. People who I personally KNOW don’t have any money are buying cigarettes and candy and pop and all kinds of shit. It’s like, no wonder you’re poor!” Chad explains, “people are poor because they blow the ir money … a lotta people are poor because they just aren’t careful and they don’t care.” Josh’s identification of excessive consumption as a common cause of poverty is representative of the comments made by these workers. He explains,

Most people are poor because they waste their money. Not all, but the large majority. People are addicted to spending. They’re making, like, ten bucks an hour but they got satellite TV. They run up their debt going and buying new clothes and going out to eat. I know some who even refuse to buy their food from stores like Aldi’s or Save-A-Lot or the lower end stores, because they say it tastes bad. It’s a really big thing. So you don’t feel too sorry for most people because they choose how they live. They’re spending like that and choosing to be poor.

This explanation—that poor people are irresponsible with money—is typical of the comments made by those who point to individual wastefulness as a significant source of poverty.
While most who cite irresponsibility as a cause of financial struggle pinpoint consumption as the primary issue, a small subset of workers says that most poor people simply lack basic money management skills. According to Tiffany, “a lot of the poor just don’t know how to be smart with their money. They don’t know about saving and stuff like that. So they just live paycheck to paycheck because that’s all they know.” Jody agrees, explaining that most people are poor because “they never learn how to manage their money. Their parents don’t teach them and they don’t learn in school...” While those who point to a lack of financial knowledge as a source of poverty feel more sympathy for the poor than their peers, they ultimately conclude that poverty is an individual failing. Dean’s comments reflect the mixture of sympathy and blame that runs through these individualistic explanations. He says, 

Well, it’s just a fact of life. You have every right to do what you want with your money, even if it’s stupid. Yes, it’s important to be careful and think about the future, but a lot of people who are poor were never really raised that way. They rent stuff and they do the buy here pay here thing instead of putting at least 4 or 5 dollars a day or a week away to buy. Because they don’t know better. Same thing happened to me: My parents didn’t teach me about money and the same thing happened to me when I first started working. You know, the first few paychecks you get, they just disappear. So you have to stop and figure it out. You teach yourself. Change your ways. So yeah. It’s sad that you didn’t get it when you were growing up, but there’s no excuse not to learn to manage your money when you’re older. A lot of poor people just don’t ever take the time to do that, and that’s just irresponsible.

“It's basically set up for some people to be poor and stay poor no matter how hard they try”

Slightly under half of those I spoke with explain economic failure as caused by a combination of individual failings and social structural obstacles. Acknowledging that poverty tends to be generational, these workers say that the poor face major disadvantages and obstacles that are extremely difficult to overcome.” Pointing to low wages and poor education major social structural barriers to financial stability, a number of others say that escaping poverty is no easy feat. Charles believes it is wrong to place blame at the feet of the poor. He says, “Yeah, that’s the way it’s supposed to be—work and you make it, don’t and you’re poor, but it doesn’t always happen that way. It’s not all their fault. It’s society’s fault too, because society lets it happen and
it's basically set up for some people to be poor and stay poor no matter how hard they try.” Chris agrees that social structural disadvantages are a major cause of economic failure. He explains,

But the truth is most poor people work hard. They just don’t have the same education and they get discriminated against because of their race and stuff. So they’re working at shittier jobs, but they’re working harder than most people. But they just can’t get ahead because they make nothing…

Continuing his discussion, Chris suddenly tacks right, saying, “Don’t get me wrong, for some, it’s their fault. You know, I’ve seen people I know who have no money going out to eat all the time. And I know some people just don’t want to work. So it’s a combination of both. It’s mostly not their fault, but for some of them it is.” All of the workers who share structural explanations include a similar individualistic footnote in their remarks: From Joe’s observation that “most of [the poor] didn’t get a fair shot…but, of course, plenty did. No excuse for them,” to Anita’s description of the causes of poverty as “70% society, 30% people,” each explains that poverty is mostly, but not solely, a result of broad social forces. That all discussions of structure as the primary cause of economic failure include an affirmation of individualistic explanations of poverty is a powerful reminder that neoliberal individualism is truly hegemonic.

“They should go out there and try harder…”

The vast majority of RV workers’ descriptions of the poor reflect a general adherence to neoliberal entrepreneurial morality. It does not require a close reading to recognize the moral messages embedded in workers’ discussions—their definitions of virtue and character essentially jump off the page. According to workers, many poor people are lazy, lack a strong work ethic, or are too arrogant to humble themselves to work. Further, according to those I spoke with, poor people tend to be careless, wasteful, and over-indulgent, and many are poor money managers lacking common sense and basic financial skills. Even those who account for structural causes of poverty assert that lacking morality is a cause of some poverty.
Ideas for effectively addressing the causes of poverty emphasize the importance of individual effort and—as neoliberal ideology would define it—enterprise. Nearly all spell out solutions centered on work, education, and training. Several people point out that working—even for minimum wage jobs—is a surefire way to combat poverty because it is a disciplining and motivating force. Dwayne says, “When you send ‘em to work, it’ll open them up. Get them wanting more from themselves and more from life. When you get up and go to work every morning, you realize that it may not be fun, but it does feel good. Sending people out to work will get them to build a work ethic...” Several people emphasize the value of education and training as a means of combatting poverty. Education and training are particularly commonly mentioned solutions among individuals who, like Joe, recognize structural obstacles as a significant problem for the poor. Joe says, “If we open the doors that will let them in...send them to school, get them on-the-job-training and whatnot, it could change lives. I mean it.”

NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY: THE STATE

The Role of the State

Neoliberal logics of politics, the state, and economics are inextricable, as this perspective is “convinced that economic and political systems are strictly interrelated” (Friedrich 1955:511). Most neoliberal economic theory is concerned with establishing the proper role of the state, and most political theory uses the economy as an overarching frame of reference. Because economics shape all manifestations of neoliberalism, it is impossible to discuss any of its instances without referring to the imperative of the free market. In this basic sense, then, neoliberal political thought is relatively simple in that it holds a single ideological contention and prescription: The free market is the source of human liberty and the ideal means for organizing all parts of society.
Of course, neoliberal perspectives on the role of the state are somewhat complex. As detailed in the discussion of Foucault’s concept of neoliberal governmentality presented in Chapter 2, the matter of state power represents the biggest division between neo- and classical-liberal thought. Both perspectives agree that, because no man can take care of anyone other than himself without impinging on the rights of others, the state is also incapable of such action. In his first inaugural speech, President Ronald Reagan famously gave voice to neoliberal ideology in his assertion that “…government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem” (1981). Reagan’s explanation of this somewhat blunt conclusion concisely summarizes the neoliberal perspective on state power:

> From time to time, we’ve been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. But if no one else among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?” (Reagan 1981).

Both perspectives hold the state to be responsible for ensuring and protecting the type of society that in which individuals are best able to freely pursue their and realize their specific goals and interests—a free market society. The best way to fulfill that responsibility, however, is the fork in the road where neo- and classical-liberal perspectives part ways.

According to the classical liberal perspective, free market society requires very little from the state: In addition to its responsibility to create and protect markets, the state has a duty to enforce property rights and uphold law, and to use its monopoly on the means of violence to protect its citizenry. It should enact “policies that seek strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Bockman 2007:344). Any state action not explicitly related to these basic functions is understood to be beyond the purview of the state. As such, a number of common state practices and policies—regulation of business, management of collective public resources (e.g. water, land, communications infrastructure), entitlement programs, etc.—are
understood to be inappropriate uses of state power and violations of individual sovereignty.

Rejecting the classical liberal conceptualization of the market as a natural, stable institution that is not influenced by social context, neoliberals contend that it is actually a fragile social construct that requires the protection, nourishment, and facilitation of an active state. Rather than taking a laissez faire approach to the economy, then, neoliberal ideology believes the state is a key economic actor and should intervene in civil social contexts to create the conditions necessary for healthy markets. Ultimately, then, classical liberalism believes the state should “protect the market from government in order to allow social benefits from natural exchange” (Protevi 2009:29), while neoliberalism advocates using the state “to change society to constitute an artificial and fragile market” (Protevi 2009:29).

RV workers’ discussions of the functions of government and the appropriate use of state power reveal that classical liberal notions of the state are very much alive and well in Elkhart, Elkhart. When asked, “What is the purpose of the state?” approximately half of those I spoke with make comments that echo classical liberal ideologies of the state and half share feelings reflective of the Keynesian perspective that holds that the state should manage the economy.

“Make sure we don’t get attacked and make sure we’re free, and that’s it”

The classical liberalism of Adam Smith, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and the U.S. founding fathers holds that the state exists to secure and protect freedoms—nothing more, nothing less. Thus, the role of the state is to defend the citizenry against violence, enforce private property rights, and uphold laws that ensure free speech, the freedom to practice religion, to assemble, and to petition the government. Approximately half of those I spoke with subscribe to the classical liberal definition of the purpose of the state. According to Harold,
country for…it’s our inalienable rights.

These comments are illustrative of those made by others who share this perspective. Like Harold, these workers explain that the state exists to protect citizens’ lives and liberties. Dwayne, a former U.S. soldier who’s worked in RV’s for 12 years, emphasizes the centrality of the state’s duty to ensure national security, noting, “I think the role of the government is to set up what we initially started I think it is to protect…” Others focus on the importance of ensuring fundamental freedoms. According to Nick, the purpose of the state is “…to protect freedom of speech, free press, and the freedom to believe whatever you want.” Each of these workers mention at least one of these core functions, and many raise both. Gary believes the government is “…there to make sure we don’t get attacked and make sure we’re free, and that’s it.”

The final part of Gary’s explanation—“…and that’s it”—highlights a paradigm-defining tenet of classical liberalism: The state is, ultimately, a threat to individual freedoms, and its power must be limited and contained. The most restrictive iteration of this paradigm maintains that most actions beyond the scope of protecting life and liberty violate the rights of individuals to control their worlds. Although this narrow perspective has never been established practice, it has had a powerful and enduring influence on attitudes toward the state, particularly in the U.S., where the desire for limited government was one of the primary motivations underlying the nation’s foundation. While classical liberal perspectives vary in their definitions of legitimate government functions, all agree that state power and individual freedom are in constant tension and that the latter should take precedence in most instances.

All of those who express classical liberal leanings stress the importance of limited government. A significant proportion of these workers cite constitutional authority and U.S. political tradition in making their cases. Gerald, for example, explains:

We’re supposed to be living in a republic, which is a limited government. They should butt out.
That’s it, in a nutshell. I mean, you could say a lot of things about it, but, in a republic…the concept is that people best govern themselves. And it is the people, the individuals should be allowed to be free to do as much or as little as they choose to do with their life.

Like Gerald, those making a constitutional argument for limited government say that government influence threatens the most sacred of American values: Freedom. These explanations inhere a definition of liberty as negative freedom—the absence of obstacles and rules limiting autonomy and the liberty to live according to individually determined dictates instead of coercive state mandates. For Constance, being American means “...taking responsibility for your own things. For you own self and do what’s right. I don’t think the government should have control.” Bob maintains that negative freedoms are guaranteed by the constitution, arguing, “You show me where in the constitution it says that the government sets all the rules for every little thing like they do now. It doesn’t.”

The majority of those who share the classical liberal vision believe that state’s reach has extended too far into the lives of its citizenry and argue that current governmental control exceeds constitutional limits and constitutes a burden on individual liberty. Noting, “I think they [the government] have way too much influence in people’s lives…” Andrew explains, “They are supposed to worry about the big things, like keeping the country from being attacked. But I think, like nowadays they have too much power and they get in our lives over the little things that are none of their business.” Similarly upset by what he views as excessive state power Matthew is concerned that governmental control constitutes a significant threat to freedom. He asserts, “What we have now is an all out assault on everything that we were intended to be. Everything that god gave us through our founding fathers and everything that we hoped to accomplish on a personal level…” Those who adhere to the classical liberal perspective on the purpose and function of the state agree that the U.S. government is far more powerful than it should be and believe it’s excessive power impinges upon individual rights. This shared
understanding is well reflected by Sean’s observation that “the ones in power have more and more control and we have less and less freedom.”

In addition to citing constitutional logic to support their opinions, many say that the government’s untrustworthiness and incompetence have made the restriction of state power a practical necessity. A number of these workers explain that although it often engages in unethical activities that harm society, the U.S. government is so opaque that it is rarely held accountable when it violates individual rights. Expressing her distrust because of this significant lack of transparency, Karen explains, “…you never really know what’s going on. You just know what they tell you … they’ll tell you oh we’re going to do this, but in reality, they’re doing the exact opposite. And they don’t want you to know … So I think the less power they have, the better for everyone.” Similar distrust is reflected in others’ descriptions of the state as criminal, power-hungry, and actively working against public interests. In an exchange that becomes increasingly heated as it continues, Richard, 59, and his son William, 36 (somewhat amusingly) ponder the relationship between the state and freedom:

William: Yeah, but do you really trust [the government]? To do what’s best for you?
Richard: As long as they keep us free, I guess, that’s the main thing…
William: Yeah, but are we really free.
Richard: Yes, we are.
William: I think they just let us think we’re free!
Richard: No! I can get up in the morning and I can go wherever I want to go and they don’t bother me.
William: Yeah but you gotta do whatever the government says and you don’t know what they’re doing. That’s not being free!
Richard: Well, you gotta have laws!
William: Right, but there’s also an illusion of freedom, too, I mean…that’s what I think. I mean, are we really free? The government has so much power and they do whatever they want and we don’t even know about it. How do we know when we vote that we really – who we voted for really goes in and…
Richard: Well… I guess we don’t know if it’s recorded…
William: I mean, what do they do? The government really runs us—
Richard: --Always have. That has never changed. You have never known what you…what the government was up to!
William: Back in the day you did! When the constitution was made up. Of the people, for the people.
Richard: How would you know? You weren’t there! It’s the same as it’s always been, we’re just as free as we were when we voted 20 years ago.
A number point to government incompetence as an important reason its power should be limited. Explaining his disgust with government, Abe says, “I don't think they do a good job managing what they're supposed to manage now … It's just seems like the United States is going in the shitter … They haven't been helping like they say they've been helping, they've actually been making it worse.” A disenchanted Ken observes, “…they’re idiots who screw things up so bad they don’t deserve the power they say is theirs. So it’s our job to keep ‘em in-line.” Summarizing the general sentiment shared by those who express unhappiness with the state’s ineptitude, Daniel asserts, “They less they can do, the less they mess up.”

Suspicion of the state and commitment to limiting its power is particularly pronounced in discussions of the proper relationship between government and the economy. Taken together, their perspective on this dynamic is best summarized by Dwayne’s assertion that the state’s relationship with the national economy should be almost entirely “hands off.” These workers maintain that government involvement—what they describe as “control” or “interference”—in the free market violates individual rights. Patricia’s comments on the constitutionality of state economic action is illustrative of this generally shared sentiment. She explains,

> Every time the government regulates or takes control of something. It takes it away. It takes not only the money away from the people, but it takes the freedom away from the people. They should butt out. That’s it, in a nutshell … And it is the people, the individuals should be allowed to be free to do as much or as little as they choose to do with their life. And that includes the economics of their life …Capitalism’s not a bad word; it’s really a good thing … The more that they interfere with it, the less freedom and the less opportunity that we have. And a republic is about freedom of opportunity and equality of opportunity, not in the literal.

In addition to their concern with what some describe as “constitutional violations,” these workers believe that state economic interventions have, ultimately, damaged the national economy and delayed (or even undermined) recovery. According to Sean,
I’ve never, never heard it been proven that there’s any system out there that shows proof that the government can take care of the economy. And if you know your economics, you know that the President in charge has very little to do with the economy. Especially the current economy state. You know, now some of the provisions and laws and regulations that the president pushes for will play a major negative role in the economy years down the road.

In comments reflective of this group of workers’ commonly shared frustration with the state’s economic role, Gary says, “...the government has butted their nose in too many places where it don’t belong and this is where it’s got us.” Laughing, he continues, “You know, maybe we can give it a run without ‘em, what do you think? I think it would be worth a try.”

“Help the people, that’s what they’re there for…”

Strongly rejecting the classical liberal ideology espoused by their fellow RV workers, approximately half of those I spoke with tend to take a more Keynesian view of the relationship between the state and the economy. Unbothered by the classical liberal fear of intrusive government, these workers believe that the state has a duty to take the actions necessary to improve social conditions so that individuals can lead good lives. For Josh, “the purpose of the U.S. government, in my opinion, is to keep the United States working properly. Keep people employed, to keep people happy … to do the best it can to make people happy.” This group of workers generally agrees that the purpose of the state is to do what it takes to make a better, happier, healthier America. Nancy’s explanation is illustrative of the comments made by those who share this perspective. She says,

I think they should help people. Help the people, that’s what they’re for. They represent us, so they’re supposed to be working to make life better for all of us, plain and simple. They’re supposed to have our best interests in mind when they pass laws and they’re supposed to do what it takes to keep us safe and help us have the opportunities to do our best.

By and large, these workers expect the state to be actively concerned with—and willing to take action to ensure—the safety and the welfare of its citizens. Tiffany explains that the state has a responsibility to protect people “…from the bad things in our own country.”
One of the most important ways the state should “help,” according to these workers, is by protecting Americans from economic pain and suffering. All who express a more populist perspective on state power agree that the state is tasked with maintaining economic stability and solving market crises. In their view, the government has the right—and the duty—to take action to safeguard the public from some of the worst excesses of capitalism. From prohibiting outsourcing and capping oil prices to punishing corporate misconduct, they believe that the state has a responsibility to create and enforce laws and champion policies that will extend economic opportunities to all Americans. Stanley feels “…it’s the government’s job is to take care of the economy so that people can have good jobs and raise their families.” While most make similarly broad assertions, a few, like Dean, share more specific opinions of the state’s economic responsibilities. He says the government should

... Make certain, either stipulations or rules to where, if you’re gonna fire somebody or something like that, there better be a good reason so that person is protected...and everybody can keep working...because you have a right to work and you have a right not to work. But at the same time, you’re forced to work because otherwise you can’t live, so the state has to make sure that you can work.

These individuals believe that the government is an ally—or at least, that it is supposed to be an ally—to working Americans. Rather than a menace to individual liberty, they see the state (when it is fulfilling its obligations and playing its proper role) as a protective force that can and should safeguard citizens. Although they are less likely than their classical liberal peers to discuss the sanctity of liberty or discuss freedom as an end in itself, these workers’ comments reveal that they do very much value freedom, but simply define it in a different way. They believe that the state has a duty to ensure positive freedom, or, as U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt put it, the “freedom from want.” According to this definition of freedom, those who lack the basic necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter) may be free from state coercion but are not truly free because they are enslaved by starvation, exposure, and need. Liberty, then, requires
an adequate standard of living. When people are free from want, they are truly free to pursue the
lives they choose and achieve their goals. In her discussion of state responsibility, Helen gives
voice to an understanding of positive freedom shared by this group of workers. She says,

Yeah, I do think they [the government] have certain responsibilities that people can’t do on their
own. Like they’re supposed to make sure things don’t get too, too bad for people, that they don’t
starve, that their houses don’t burn down, that they aren’t kicked out of the ER if they don’t have
money...stuff like that, keeping everyone at a basic level. I mean, that’s part of the reason that you
have money taken out of your check. Taxes and stuff, you know, it goes towards paying
firefighters and food stamps and paying the troops to protect us and all that. And those are good
things that I’m glad that the government steps in to do to protect and help people.

Those who share this perspective agree freedom doesn’t mean very much if a person isn’t able to
get by, as Joanne explains, “…if you’re working and trying to make a living and you’re still not
making it, who cares about anything else?”

Clearly sensitive to the common critique that positive freedom amounts to little more
than “free-loading,” some who adhere to this definition of freedom take care to distinguish
between “helping” individuals and “taking care” of them. Those who make this distinction define
“helping” as ensuring safety, equal opportunity, and the basic means of survival (food, etc.) for
citizens—duties they believe are the responsibility of the state. Noting that the state is not
responsible providing for every need—or “taking care” of individuals—they say that people
must work and take responsibility for their lives and decisions. Theresa explains,

So if things get real bad and somebody bottoms out, there should be government programs to help
that person. And I’m not saying that the person doesn’t have to work or whatever. They have to do
whatever they need to do to help themselves instead of just relying on the government to take care
of their every need. I don’t think that’s what they’re there for. I’m saying that when things get real
desperate and they need help, somebody should be there.

Thus, the state has an obligation to ensure that its people have access to the basic resources they
need to survive and that they do not, as Susan puts it, “fall through the cracks.”

Although this more populist group of individuals express an understanding of the state’s
proper role that contrasts sharply with the vision of their classical liberal fellow RV workers,
both groups are united in their distrust of and disappointment with government, albeit for very
different reasons. Where their peers who express classical liberal ideology are wary of what they believe is an overreaching state, those who expect government economic management are distrustful of what they see as an uncaring, dehumanizing, and corrupt state. The latter group feels that the government has failed to fulfill its responsibility to build a strong social safety net that ensures that all individuals have an opportunity to create the lives they want. Zachary explains, “…it’s their job to look ahead and to find situations and make sure that things don’t get so bad that people just fall off completely. But what it seems that they’ve been doing is not helping as much as look out for their own interests, their own self.” Expressing similar versions of such suspicion and disenchantment, others say that they feel let down by a government that cares more about profit and power than its own people. Tony says, “That’s what’s happening to America, really strong. They don’t give a shit about us … I just don’t believe in the government anymore. I feel very disappointed! Sold out!” Explaining that the U.S. government is not committed to fulfilling its proper role, these individuals are disappointed by what they see as a dereliction of duty.

Tracing their cynicism to the belief that elected officials have been corrupted by moneyed interests and that, as Joe says, “they only care about themselves,” these workers simply don’t trust that their government is interested in the welfare and well being of average Americans like themselves. Richard’s comments are illustrative those who share similar explanations of their distrust of the state. He says,

I think the corporations run the government, and I don’t really trust either one. What’s the difference? There ‘aint none! They’re all in bed together. Because the corporations are the ones that are paying the candidates money to run. And once they get in office, the politicians do whatever the corporations want.

Observing that elected leaders are motivated more by personal greed than by service, these workers argue that, in addition to ignoring their welfare, their government routinely ignores their
voices. Burt notes, “they don’t care and so they screw up really bad, so…I mean, but what can you do about it? …You can write letters and whatever, but like they’re paying attention to you.” Cutting to the heart of the matter, Barbara succinctly captures this general sentiment: When it comes to the government fulfilling its duty to help people, she says, “I have no faith in them.”

**Market Regulation**

Despite their approaches to the state’s economic role, classical- and neo- liberalism share a fundamental belief that free markets are the best means for creating opportunity, prosperity, and a healthy society. Both perspectives generally view regulations (e.g. labor laws, a minimum wage, pollution limits) created and enforced by the state as an unfair and unhealthy use of articulation of power. All market participants free and equal—until the state uses its power to create and/or enforce regulation. In doing so, the state distorts markets and infringes on individuals’ freedom circulate as they see fit in pursuit of their own interests. According to this logic, state regulatory interventions kill creativity, restrict innovation, stifle competition, reduce profitability and, ultimately, disincentivize market participation. State interventions produce inefficiencies, increasing prices, and decreasing quality and value of the goods and services traded in market exchange. When free from the burdens of jumping through bureaucratic hoops or meeting specific state-mandated requirements, market actors are more competitive, more efficient, and, ultimately, more productive (Friedman 1953; 1962; 1981).

Neoliberal thought holds that “state interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second guess market signals (prices) and because powerful interests will inevitably distort and bias state interventions (particularly in democracies) for their own benefit” (Harvey 2007:23). While classical liberal thought mandates total deregulation, neoliberalism allows for some (minimal)
state regulation if it does not interfere with market mechanisms and is proven to support
economic growth and increase profitability. Generally, however, neoliberal ideology supports
market deregulation and largely prohibits direct interventions by the state into the economy.

“Business needs to be free to do business. That’s what America is about”

Just under a third of the RV workers I spoke with disapprove of the state regulation of
business because they feel that state dictates and requirements negatively affect business and are
harmful to the U.S. economy. Although they use different rationales—regulations are
cumbersome, regulations are unfair, regulations are un-American—to support their arguments,
all conclude that state regulation of business is a significant and dangerous threat to economic
stability. Citing the expense and confusion involved in meeting state-imposed mandates, many
argue that regulations are obstacles to efficient and productive economic growth that chain
commerce and hinder success. Arguing that state regulation limits existing operations, Brett says,
“They put all these limits and rules on companies ... Instead of encouraging companies who are
doing good to become bigger, they’re kind of trying to slow them down by putting all these
regulations on them.” Many are especially concerned by the affect of regulation on new and
smaller businesses, as they believe that state regulations dis-incentivize entrepreneurialism. Brett
continues, noting, “… And there’s not a lot of incentive for people to start their own business
these days. You know, why put all your heart and soul and money into something if the
government’s gonna make you pay big money and jump through crazy hoops just to get going?”

Many anti-regulation workers share Brett’s feelings. Several have tales of failing small
businesses that they attribute to regulation. Alan describes a friend who had a house cleaning
business that didn’t survive because the government “…stepped in with so many things that made
things too hard for her…” Noting that requirements imposed by the government derailed his dreams of starting his own business, Dennis says,

Oh, I was talking to somebody again the other day, and then I’ve talked to other guys at work. What could we do to like start our own business? What could we do to start something up…you know I’ve talked to different people and they draw up the business plan and they go talk to the right people or maybe they know somebody that’s got some money that will back them to start. But then we look into it more and find out all we have to do to get going—all of the rules we have to follow and the requirements we have to meet, and we just can’t do it.

Prominent in these discussions is an assertion that regulations the essential American freedom of free enterprise. Patricia explains, “The government is limiting freedom. They have to free up business to do business. Free enterprise is what made this country… If they don’t loosen some strings on small businesses who make up 83% of the business force of this entire country, they’re just going to have another recession right on the heels of this one. They’re violating the constitution.” By dictating the conditions of commerce and establishing limits and requirements that they believe are expensive, unnecessary, and confusing, these workers argue that the state is limiting enterprise, harming the economy, and, ultimately, curtailing the freedom to achieve and succeed. All make some comment similar to Donna’s assertion that “business needs to be free to do business. That’s what America is about.” It’s clear that, for these individuals, freedom entails economic liberty, which they define as a minimally regulated market. This feeling is well illustrated by Harold’s proclamation that

Right now, China’s more conducive for businesses than the United States is! That sucks. China doesn’t have all the same rules and regulations and limits for business, so they have more economic freedom. Well, we need to have a model like China…they’re freer in some ways because they are so pro-business.

That he would view China—a nation with a relatively minimally regulated market that is, nonetheless, officially communist—as having more economic freedom than the U.S. reflects the classical liberal ideology that holds state economic regulation to be a grave violation of the fundamental principle of freedom itself.
Assuming that resistance to state regulation and a high valuation of the free market meant these workers have a measure of faith in business to operate ethically on its own accord, I asked them if they trust business. Their answers to this question reveal an important logical distinction that determines the way they conceptualize business and shapes their opinions of state regulation. The majority of anti-regulation workers say that they see Wall Street operations and small independent business as two different animals. Nick notes, “Those traders and CEOs have power and money, whereas mom and pop shops don’t have much … the big ones are the corrupt ones and should be the ones they crack down on. The little ones need less rules so they have the freedom to get going.” Many share the opinion that big corporations should be regulated and smaller businesses should not. Donna’s comments are representative those made by others.

Explaining this logic, she says:

Small businesses can be trusted, because they’re selling a product. And they have to have the American people believe in their product. Whereas Wall Street’s and big companies like Wal-Mart are not…they’re either just trading money or they are so big that they own the market. So…there’s a big difference. Those companies, they don’t care if the people in America like them or not, so they can’t be trusted and the government needs to watch them. The smaller guys, though, they have to be honest because otherwise people won’t use them. So there’s a difference. Big business should have more rules.

RV workers’ stances are somewhat more specific than the classical liberal ideology of minimal regulation: Rather than viewing all regulation as a violation of freedom, these individuals come out strongly in favor of state regulation of large corporations—a stance that their pro-regulation peers agree with, and moreover, cite as the primary inspiration for their pro-regulatory stances.

“Somebody’s Gotta Step In”

Over two-thirds of the RV workers I spoke with express support for state regulatory power. Rather than viewing the state as a threat to freedom that stifles economic growth, these workers say the state is a source of freedom and growth. They believe that government has a
duty to regulate business—large and small—in order to protect citizens and promote growth.

Chris explains:

At this point, they can’t step off. If they step off, and we’re gonna have more of the Enrons, the Tycos, all of that. State restriction is the only thing that keeps businesses in check. I don’t know…it’s almost like, imagine like a pervert or a pedophile that’s business. And the federal government, they’re holding a leash, and we’re all just a kindergarten class. That’s pretty much how it’s working. They’re pretty much just holding on to that leash just praying to God that it doesn’t break. It’s kind of a necessary evil, that we don’t have a choice...

These comments are representative of the general perspective voiced by those who desire regulation. They see regulation as a “necessary evil”—a less-than-ideal yet essential state duty necessary to rein in corruption, protect people, and prevent future economic downturns.

According to these workers, because business prioritizes profit over individual welfare and economic stability, it can’t be trusted to operate ethically. Nathan says that when business is “… left to their own devices, they’re not necessarily gonna do what’s good for the country. They’re fucking greedy.” All who desire increased oversight share Nathan’s leeriness and skepticism, and many trace these feelings back to a basic belief that greed has corrupted all business. Howard says, “it’s is all greed and no morals,” and Joe argues that businesses are “greedy and they're out for themselves. They’re not looking out for the welfare of people or the whole economy.” Pro-regulation workers share a common understanding of unregulated business as corrupt, greedy, profit-driven, harmful to people, and threatening to economic stability.

*Minimal Regulation Produces Unfair and Unsafe Work*

Explaining that minimal or no regulation leaves workers at the mercy of corporations with interests counter to their own, a large proportion of pro-regulation individuals point to harmful business practices and corporate abuse as justification for state intervention. These discussions include illustrations and anecdotes spanning a broad and diverse range of practices harmful to employees. Noting that minimal regulation has ravaged the U.S. economy by making outsourcing not only possible, but also common, Peter says that corporations “… don’t have any
rules to stop them from sending jobs overseas to other countries where you find labor cheaper, so they all do it.” According to Abe, “now in corporate America, they make the rules, so they don’t have any rules, and they get away with smoke and mirrors and send all their jobs to China. They don’t care how it hurts the economy so long as they are making money.” Many also say that minimal regulation makes it easier for businesses to employ illegal immigrants. Tony explains, “Corporate America got a lot to do with the illegals being here, because, you know, they cheat wages and they save a lot of money that way…Because if you’re an illegal … they can just hire you in ... There’s no social security, no unemployment that has to be paid...” It is important to note that workers’ resentment over the employment of “illegals” is directed at those taking the jobs as well as those providing the jobs. In fact, a small number devote the entirety of their anger to employers. Howard, for example, says he “feel[s] sorry for them that way. They want to come to America and better themselves, and then they get these jobs where they are taken advantage of and hurt and make nothing. It’s not right for businesses to do that...”

A large number of pro-regulation individuals argue that failure to adhere to regulations results in unsafe work environments. Despite working for different companies in a diversity of production positions, many have a common experience that illustrates their point: Once informed of workplace safety regulations at the start of a new job, the regulations were then abandoned. Tiffany says hearing about the regulations once, “was pretty much the extent of it.” Noting that safety protocols were routinely ignored at work, many recall instances in which they were hurt on the job while performing unsafe work. Describing their various injuries—from burns and cuts to back injuries and nerve damage—these individuals say that, as Dean puts it, “they may have safety rules, but they don’t follow them if it will take longer or cost money to follow them. And nobody makes them follow the rules.”
Many who produced RV’s for FEMA following Hurricane Katrina relate frighteningly vivid illustrations of the workplace consequences of under-regulation. The urgency of producing such a large number of units meant that safe practices were even less of a concern than usual. In addition to an increase in injuries, this work also affected workers in a way they had never experienced before. Karen recalls:

We didn’t know it, but those units were all – from what I’ve heard—they were contaminated. You know, and it was like wood and stuff. I don’t know what’s in it – asbestos, whatever. Nobody really told us. Anyway, we were all getting pretty sick everyday at work. I mean, not sick, like deathly ill. But you would definitely like…as soon as you open the door, your eyes would water automatically. It was just a fume like you’ve never smelled. It’s almost like the smell of very strong…and you’re like, what is that smell? Just a rotten, dead…Yeah. And then we’d have to be in there all day, and you’d get out of one and go to the next one, and it’s the same. You’re like, oh my god, I’m gonna die…Oh, god yeah. And I heard that some of the people who lived in those…there was a few cases, I know, that had gotten very sick. They had to wear the respirators, I know.

Relating similar experiences, others say that they didn’t find out they were working with unsafe materials until the federal government rejected the units they’d produced because of their toxic formaldehyde content. Worried about the long-term health consequences of their exposure to formaldehyde, many make comments similar to Sharon, who says, “it never should have happened. The government should get a little more involved, you know, and put some stricter guidelines on things…” Sharon is not alone in making this point, as others who had worked on the FEMA units agree that the lack of safety regulations or a failure to follow them had put their health in danger.

**Minimal Regulation Produces Rampant Corruption**

According to many, misconduct and fraud are so common in the business world that they’re essentially normative. These individuals believe prevalent corruption has produced an increasingly unfair society that favors business elites and the wealthy. Describing this problem, Rodney says, “…business is so out of control and the greedy people are so greedy…they have millions and millions of dollars…and they just want more and more and more.” As Helen sees
it, “They just do whatever will make them richer and richer and nobody is stopping them. So the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” In addition to increasing inequality, many believe that business corruption has led to increasing disempowerment of “ordinary people.” Explaining that they feel relatively voiceless and overlooked, these workers attribute their disempowerment to their inability to compete with business elites’ influence on national discourse and policy. Joe explains, “We the peons don’t have no power to do anything. Nobody listens to us. They listen to the money. So all they’re gonna do is make it so they can get richer and richer and richer…”

These feelings of impotence are a commonly touched upon theme in these discussions of economic regulation. Helen says, “…So a company is a person because they make money, but they don’t have to follow any rules. Meanwhile, I’m a person and I do have to follow rules. But nobody cares unless you have money and power.”

A number of workers argue that government regulation is the only means by which economic corruption can be reined in. Several note that, because working people lack the ability to influence business practices, the state must do it in their stead. Discussing the necessity of state regulation, Rodney explains, “So the government has to be involved because business is so out of control. If the government didn’t stop them, it would just get worse … if you or me can’t step in to make rules and stop them, who can? The government. So we have to have government rules and regulations.” For these workers, state economic regulation—what Ruth describes as “somebody steppin’ in and putting their foot in their ass and making them follow the rules”—is not the threat to freedom and growth described by their anti-regulation peers. Rather, they believe such regulation is a path to decreasing inequality, reigning in corruption, and ensuring that the interests of ordinary citizens are accounted for.
Many point out that regulations tend to be enforced for average working people and ignored for the wealthy. A number of workers assert that regulatory policy is inherently skewed to benefit some at the expense of others. Dean explains, “They have all kinds of stipulations or rules to where you have to do this and that if you’re gonna get unemployment or any kind of help. And there are tons of rules for us to follow, but in the meantime, those rich guys don’t have rules…and nobody makes ‘em even follow the rules they do have.” These workers say that disproportionate regulation stems from the close relationship between lawmakers, regulators, and big business. Howard notes, “I still blame it all on big business—they have the money and power to set the rules themselves. And they just made it to where the government turned a blind eye to a lot of that.” William’s comments on disproportionate regulation reflect those made by many others. He says,

I think the corporations run the government, so I don’t know if I really trust either one. You know, what’s the difference? They’re kind of the same, you know, the same guys doing all the same stuff. Because the corporations are the ones that are paying the candidates money to run, and the candidates are the ones letting them get away with whatever they want because it’s not gonna hurt them—it hurts us.

Ultimately, for these workers, absent and disproportionate regulation represents a serious betrayal of the average U.S. citizen. For them, regulations are the primary means of protecting the interests and ensuring the welfare of people like themselves. According to Jeffrey, “You know, this is a government by the people for the people…and government is supposed to be working for the people, doing what the people want…because the people can’t do things directly themselves. But it seems like they don’t do that anymore. They work against the people and for the rich.” Illustrating this shared sense of betrayal, Rodney says, “So in the end, even though it is the government’s job to make rules and regulations that kind of look out for people against big business, they don’t do it. They don’t care about the little guy like you and me, they’ll walk all over us and not even give it a second thought.”
There is no doubt that, as is true for the nation as a whole, the issue of the state regulation of business is a highly contentious and important one among Elkhart’s RV workers. Those who support minimally regulated markets maintain that regulation is an unnecessary and wasteful overreach of state power that limits the entrepreneurialism and freedoms that have made the U.S. an economic powerhouse for decades. Nick’s argument that “the government just wants power. They know that the free market works best when its left alone, but they don’t care because they want to control everything,” artfully illustrates the distrust of the state power and the profound faith in the market at the heart of these workers’ anti-regulation stances. In contrast, the majority of those I spoke with do not feel that business should be untouchable. They believe that the state has a duty to use regulation as a means of protecting its citizenry. According to these workers, minimally regulated markets produce corruption, unsafe working conditions, and rampant abuses that benefit the few at the expense of the many. As Sharon says, “Without rules, we get mass chaos… it’s like a classroom with no teacher. The guys go crazy because they don’t have anybody to stop them. And then everything just falls apart.”

Interestingly, as much as pro- and anti-regulation workers differ, their feelings about business and the state are relatively homologous. Specifically, both groups are somewhat skeptical and leery of both. Distrust of business is not limited to those in favor of regulation—the workers who prefer a minimally regulated market express some serious misgivings towards big business. However, rather than treating all operations as an indistinguishable whole, anti-regulation workers delineate specific differences between “business” and “big business/Wall Street.” While they feel that regulation of “business” is largely untenable, they do agree that regulation of “big business/Wall Street” is an acceptable means by which to combat the corruption and bad practices that are common in these operations. In this way, then, like those in
favor of regulation, these workers acknowledge that not all businesses operate ethically and produce outcomes beneficial to the overall economy.

Similarly, wariness of the state is not at all limited to those resistant to regulation: Like anti-regulation individuals, workers who favor increased state oversight express serious feelings of mistrust toward the government. Unlike their anti-regulation peers, however, their wariness is not rooted in concern with an expansive, overreaching state that jeopardizes economic freedom. Rather, they are distrustful of, and disappointed by, what they see as a limited and underactive state whose unwillingness to take regulatory action has jeopardized worker safety and the stability of the U.S. economy. Ultimately, then, although they all believe that the state is more interested in maintaining and expanding its own power than protecting its people, these individuals point to related but divergent evidence to support their arguments: Anti-regulation workers confirm the problem of state power by highlighting the creation and enforcement of regulation, while those who support increased oversight do the same thing by citing absent and under-enforced regulatory policy.

Market Creation

Neoliberal thought holds the state responsible for creating and expanding the market, which is conceptualized as an inherently equalizing force that only rewards work and merit. Hailed as the best means of fostering and incentivizing individual enterprise, markets are seen as the ideal means for organizing all arenas of human social life. Neoliberal economists advocate privatization as an ideal means of fulfilling this responsibility, as privatization creates markets and shrinks the size and influence of the state. Thus, “if markets do not exist (in areas such as education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution), then they must be created, by state action if necessary” (Harvey 2007:23). This logic holds that state management constitutes
an unfair monopoly and thus distorts market equality and competition. Moreover, because state awarded contracts tend to be determined by political winds and loyalties rather than market-determined merit, publicly managed goods and services are less efficient, more costly, and of poorer quality than they would be if managed by a profit-motivated enterprise. The goals of privatization is to “promote unfettered competition by getting the state out of the businesses of ownership … [and] … to ‘desacralize’ institutions that had formerly been protected from the forces of private market competition, such as education and health care” (Mudge 2008:704). The neoliberal for privatization has inspired countless efforts to privatize highways, welfare, unemployment, social security, prisons, pollution management and other public goods and services in hopes of eliminating bureaucracy, increasing efficiency, and fostering enterprise

Elkhart’s RV workers have somewhat mixed feelings about privatization and the state’s economic role. Approximately half decry state management and express confidence in private industry’s ability to repair and manage the economy, create jobs, and efficiently administer goods services. Not all share this enthusiasm for private management, as some express profound distrust of private industry’s motives and practices, and a number of workers believe that certain crucial resources should be controlled and administered by the state.

“When has the government ever run something better than private industry?”

A significant proportion of those I spoke with say that private business is better suited to manage the economy because the state is inept. Their various explanations of this ineptness cohere into a broad contention that state policies and programs are wasteful and misguided. Peter’s comment that the state “spends too easily what we have” is representative of most workers’ comments on government waste. In similarly general denouncements of profligate spending—what they refer to as “pork”—most share critiques that are no more specific than
Peter’s assertion that the government “just gives [money] out to any group or country or person, and it’s a total waste.” A handful go beyond broad denouncements of waste to share more detailed critiques, making comments similar to Ryan’s argument that

The government is wasting all this money on war … all the money that it’s costing us to go overseas and fight these wars that no longer exist. We’re just sticking our nose where it shouldn’t be, and … I just think we’re spending a lot of money over there that we shouldn’t. I think we should pull our guys back, all of our troops. All that money that we’re spending is going down the toilet.

All who lambast military spending as wasteful assert that this money could be put to use in a number of more productive ways—from Ryan’s desire to “save it and lower taxes” to Sean’s vision of “using all that money to teach people how to do research … research to learn how to form some sort of alternative to fossil fuels.” Whether their criticisms are general or specific, all point to wasteful government spending as evidence of the state’s economic incompetence.

Several say that the state is not only wasteful, but is also ignorant—or, more kindly, as Sharon puts it, “lacking expertise.” Approximately half of those I spoke with observe that the government has does not have the resources—expertise, experience, skilled, expert professionals—necessary for managing a single business, let alone a national economy.

Explaining that the state’s lack of business acumen routinely leads to ill-informed and illogical practices, they report that the state’s forays into the economic realm tend to be disastrous. Randall says, “Yeah, the economy needs to be fixed, but they don’t know how to do it. When the government gets involved, they screw things up worse.” Dwayne is disgusted by what he calls “pure ignorance on the part of the state.” He explains:

I don’t think the government…I don’t think anybody there has enough knowledge or experience to do some of the things that they are doing. There is a President in charge of the military who has never been in the military. There are all these congress people who are trying to help businesses but they are not running any business of their own… I mean what do they know about it? They cannot even read the bill that they are signing that affects everybody. So I don’t think I feel warm and fuzzy that I am in good hands. They’re a joke.
Like Dwayne, many say they believe that political leaders make disastrous economic decisions because they are ignorant of basic business principles. Worse than this ignorance, according to many, is policymakers’ profoundly stubborn unwillingness to listen to outside experts. Several of these workers say that the state is an ineffective economic manager and generally ill-suited to manage much of anything at all. A number of those who are dismayed by the state’s waste and incompetence express a preference for privatization. Constance explains, “Government’s too big…Contract that out to other business or whatnot, that’s a better idea. Instead of taking care of all of it, get other people, instead of trying to control it.”

Contrasting the state’s waste, fraud, and general ineptitude with the efficiency, innovation, and success they associate with private industry, some are confident that the private sector could more effectively repair the economy and ensure its stability and health. Rather than highlighting specific corporations or private organizations, these workers discuss “business” generally, painting a picture of expertise, flexibility, and economic aptitude. According to Sharon, “They’re better off to contract certain stuff out to other businesses or whatnot, that's a better idea. Businesses know what they’re doing and can make things work better…they have the experience and expertise.” Echoing this sentiment, several people say that private innovation is the true engine of economic growth and that business—not the state—is able to create jobs to put them back to work.

It is worth noting that this faith in business is not entirely untroubled or without reservation: It is not uncommon for workers to heartily praise private enterprise as superior to the state, and, in the next breath, express disappointment and contempt for business. For example, after asserting, “You know, businesses are basically the ones employing people, Brent says, …If businesses, a lot of them, if they weren’t so greedy and they were more willing to invest and out a little more money into building a line of car or a new RV or new products, which means building new plants and making more jobs, I think that would strengthen the economy.
Similarly, Nathan says, “…The government doesn’t create jobs. The private sector does. Private industry has to do that…” and continues, “of course, when you look at what they have been doing—largely outsourcing as much industry as they possibly could—you can see the problem.” Constance admits that in some instances, private managers of public resources “…didn’t do it right, either. So, the government then feels like it has to step in. You know, some people didn’t fulfill their job.” Thus, workers’ preferences for business over the state in economic matters should not be conflated with uncritical reverence for the private sector. Through they may agree with Harold’s comment that “we got to let business take care of business,” most don’t believe that business has done a very good job of taking care of itself or the national economy.

“They want to sell everything and put it up for rent”

The majority of those who prefer the state to the private sector say they trust government more because it is a democratic institution charged with protecting and caring for all Americans (in theory, at least, if not in reality). Several people point out that business has no such responsibility and is more interested in profit than people. Tom explains, “They don’t care about the little guy like you or me, and will walk all over us, and not even give it a second thought.” Although they enunciate many of the same criticisms of the state raised by their pro-privatization peers, these workers view the state as what Mike calls “the lesser of two evils.” In the final calculation, the fact that the government works—or at least is supposed to work—for the benefit of all rather than a handful of wealthy elites makes it less harmful than the private sector. This shared understanding is well illustrated by Ben’s assertion that “businesses don’t care about anything except money. At least with the government, it does some things that give people a chance to make it.”
These discussions illuminate a simple and very important ideological divide: Those who oppose privatization believe it is essential to keep the market (and its inherently “greedy” and profit-obsessed influence) away from the resources and institutions that serve the public. “Some things should be just off limits to business,” says Ruth. She continues, “Not everything is about making money. Why would we want a business to run the library or be in control of welfare? They would try to make money off of it! And that’s not right, those things are ours and they’re there for everyone and they’re not about making money!” This sentiment surfaces again and again among those who oppose privatization. Explaining that private industry tends to “put profit before people and before everything else,” Joe says privatization “would hurt the normal people. If businesses were running things, then we wouldn’t have nothing. They would only do things for the rich and for themselves. It’s like, “screw poor people, who cares?”” This is a common feeling, and a number of workers say they believe that public resources and services would be degraded, limited, or even eliminated if they were to be taken over by the private sector. In effect, according to Stanley, “things would be even more fucked up than they are now.”

In contrast to the broader, more theoretical arguments made by their pro-privatization peers, these workers are more likely to draw on specific examples of private control for evidence to support their stance on the evils of privatization. Approximately half mention the healthcare debate: Describing private health insurance as the major problem with the U.S. medical system, these workers say that society would be better served by a public, state-run system. Convinced that privatized healthcare creates and perpetuates inequality, Carl says, “…Insurance companies sayin’ “Oh no, we’ll go broke.” That’s cause you got too much. It's not right. And I think the government should do something about it… to make it more fair.” Mike and Anita agree that healthcare is a good example of private control gone wrong—an area where state management is
very much needed. Mike says, “why don’t they come out and say, “OK, we want to be like Canada”, or something like that? Then it will be like, OK, you want to pay for all of our healthcare, but you will tax the crap out of us. I’d be OK with it, because right now I’m paying skyrocket on insurance—“ Interjecting, Anita exclaims, “Yeah, and who’s making money? Insurance companies!!” She continues,

See that’s why. You know, what I don’t understand is, why would it be a bad idea for the government to step in? That’s what I’m trying to understand. For the government to step in for the health, and then there’s a lot of people yelling that the government should not be involved and that it’s not fair. But see, I don’t understand what would be bad about that. It’s not fair NOW! That’s what I’m kind of confused about I feel that the government should take over, you know, like—OK everybody’s that at the retirement age or older gets free medication.

Using the example of private health insurance, these workers illustrate the larger point that privatized control of vital resources is driven by greed, creates inequality, and seriously hurts working people.

A large number of people mention the Indiana toll road in their discussions of privatization gone awry. The highway, which runs through the city and is a crucial resource for local business, was managed by the state until 2006, when governor Mitch Daniels signed a 75-year lease agreement with private firms in Australia and Spain. The $3.8 billion deal (brokered by Goldman Sachs for approximately $20 million) was praised as a boon for the state and a triumph for advocates of small government. The change was extremely unpopular in Elkhart, and for good reason: Toll road fares—which hadn’t been raised for nearly twenty years prior to privatization—have yearly doubled since 2006, and the road’s leaseholders have the right to raise tolls annually until 2081. The recession made quick work of the state’s $3.8 billion profit, and Elkhart residents now pay nearly twice as much—to foreign firms, no less—to travel the same highway they’ve used for decades. Citing the toll road debacle—described by a number of people as a “bad deal”—as an example of the negative consequences of turning public goods into for-profit enterprises, a number of workers make comments similar to Randy, who feels that the
toll road deal essentially shortchanged the public. “The toll road, what a joke,” he says, shaking
his head. He continues,

I think it was a bunch of back scratching to tell you the truth. The thing that makes me mad is that
that road is technically mine, and yours, and everybody’s that’s in the state. So how come we
didn’t get to vote on it? They just sold it without askin’—it’s like stealin’ a car, sellin’ it, and then
havin’ the guy that bout it rent it back out to the original owner!

Decrying the toll road agreement in similar remarks, a number of others—including,
interestingly enough, a few proponents of privatization—say they feel as if they’ve been cheated
in the exchange. Constance, one of the more outspoken critics of state-run operations, registers
her disapproval of the deal with a frustrated sigh. “So, maybe no one can run the toll road, then.”
She laughs, and says, “No. Give it back to the state. I don’t know. Maybe somebody else or
something. I don’t know.”

Though they may hold different opinions on the merits of privatization, workers are
united by unhappiness with “greedy” private interests and belief that allowing profit-obsessed
businesses to manage public goods and services is a disservice to all. Those who support
privatization are not bothered by the pursuit of profit (they believe the profit motive produces
superior service and more efficient institutions), but instead object to greed—a corrupting
influence that diminishes the value and quality of goods and services. Arguing that greed isn’t an
inextricable part of business in the way that incompetence is an inherent feature of government,
they say that private interests are most often superior to state control. In contrast, opponents of
privatization go much further than their pro-privatization peers in their critiques of business.
Explaining that private interests should almost never be allowed to manage public resources,
these workers maintain that business is fundamentally profit-oriented and thus has no place in
public service. A number of others share similar feelings, including Nancy, who eloquently
explains,
It’s as if we’re trying to run the state on a business plan—but in my mind, I don’t see how that works when you’re dealing with people’s lives. It’s not the same as a company. And so, it’s very frustrating for people when you can’t get someone on the phone to talk to, or you go down there and you stand in lines. You feel worthless. You’re a number; you’re just a number…

You know, it’s the old thing of what looks good on paper. And when people are reading in the paper how it’s going to work and everybody’s got it all built up. But when it comes down to my life and how it affects me, all of a sudden, it doesn’t look quite the same as it did on paper. And so, I think people are beginning to look at it a little bit differently. We’ve had a lot of problems with welfare since privatizing. And we’ve had trouble with Work One since privatizing. Some people don’t feel like the toll road, the money is being used to keep the toll road up like it should be. So, there again, we’ve got three examples of privatization that are just not making people happy. And I think it proves that privatization, just, in the end, just doesn’t work. Because business and government have very different ideas and very different roles. Or, at least, they’re SUPPOSED to.

It is important to note that all are quick to agree that the state is far from perfect. A significant proportion of these individuals criticize the wasteful spending, bungling bureaucrats, and uninformed policies they say are common in state-run agencies. They argue, however, that despite the its many flaws, the government is more likely to serve the public interest and to do what is best for people because—unlike the private sector—that is what it was designed to do.

While they recognize significant problems with both state and corporate power, these workers—in much the same way that their pro-privatization peers view private industry—view the state as what the less problematic of the two. Ben says,

Oh man, it’s hard. I would have to say…man…because of that little bit of money I got from Bush and because there’s certain things like welfare and things like that, I would have to say that the government might have more of a heart. Or at least pretend to have more of a heart than an actual corporation. Because they’re more…they’re BOTH bad, but at least one attempts to help.

Not everyone is as conflicted as Ben: Three workers point out that privatization is un-American. Stanly says, “I’d rather have the government. They’re a lot bigger. They can do more. Business is out for themselves. Those people who think business is good and government is the one that’s the bad one—I’m very sorry to hear that. Because I’m patriotic and I love my country and I stand behind it.”
ECONOMIC CRISIS

Taken together, workers’ discussions reveal a commonly shared understanding of the 2008 financial crisis: Caused by the unethical behavior of greedy corporate elites and facilitated by a neglectful (and, according to many, corrupt) government, it is a disaster caused by the few but suffered by the many.

“It’s the fox guarding the henhouse, and it wrecked the whole country!”

The overwhelming majority those I spoke with—all but seven, in fact—identify lacking government regulation as the primary cause of the 2008 financial crisis. According to Rodney, the meltdown was caused by “…loose regulation of the financial market. A lot of risky investments on the part of banks and skirting the rules, and lack of regulation and things like that.” Lucy’s comment on the origins of the crisis reflects the general opinion that most express. She says, “It’s because…between big business and the non-regulation of Wall-Street, nobody was watching them... When they went and said oops! We screwed up! You know, that just really hit it in the end.” Pointing to government’s failure to enforce existing regulation as another root cause of the meltdown, some say that systemic failure to enforce existing regulations fostered an environment that enabled traders and corporations to engage in business practices that undermined national economic stability. According to Rodney,

Of course there needs to be more rules. But what’s the point when they don’t even follow the ones they have? The greedy people on Wall Street… it’s just people being greedy and dishonorable. The people who are controlling the financial strings of this country, they just got way too greedy to be bothered with following the rules, and they got away with it! The government didn’t make them follow the rules because people in the government are just as greedy. It’s the fox guarding the henhouse, and it wrecked the whole country!

A handful of workers assert that the regulatory failures of earlier decades effectively set the stage for the 2008 crash. Pointing to the wave of deregulation that began in the late 1970’s, they say that the crash was a long time in the making, these individuals make comments that
echo Burt’s outraged assertion that “They should have recognized this coming back in the 70’s when they had a big recession and they neglected it. And then they just took away pretty much all the standards. Shame on them. This was coming for a long time now. It just took 25, 30 years to get here.” Just over two thirds, however, specifically identify President George W. Bush’s approach to economic oversight as the primary cause of the crash and enduring economic pain. James observes, “It spiraled out of control. Greed and Bush. Because he got rid of all the rules so that his friends—the big dogs who were out to make a profit—could get rich. And it all collapsed on their heads. And on our heads too. And we didn't do that! They did it!” Observing, “It doesn’t matter what party they are. Sometimes it seems like the deregulation was pretty popular, and that’s what did it to us, “ Sharon cuts to the crucial point where workers’ explanations converge—though they may disagree on when the problem started, all agree that the financial crisis and subsequent meltdown were caused by non-existent and under enforced market regulation.

While it is to be expected that those generally supportive of government regulation identify lacking oversight as the cause of the crisis, it is somewhat surprising that the anti-regulation workers share this understanding of blame and responsibility. Most acknowledge this apparent contradiction in their discussions of the origins of the crisis and say that while they’re generally in favor of deregulation, exceptional circumstances sometimes warrant increased state intervention. Peter says, “I know I said before that government should stay out, but I think that works better on paper than in real life in some cases. Like for the really big corporations. They’re greedy and need to be watched. I think once you get to a certain size, there should be rules.” Similarly, Gerald, one of the most vociferously anti-regulation workers I spoke with,
acknowledges that corporate practices have, unfortunately, made regulation a necessary fact of life. He explains:

The truth is … government regulation is a violation of free enterprise. You can’t argue that. But… When you think about what’s happening now and all of the unethical business practices that caused this slump—You just have to admit that the big banks really don’t have any moral compass, and they need to be watched. I guess… I think that free enterprise is a system that works…. In theory. Because it grows the economy and provides jobs and greater freedom and wealth for everyone—IF you can trust that businesses are responsible businesses and have a sense of decency. We don’t have that, so free enterprise doesn’t necessarily work in reality right now.

A number of others who initially express support for deregulation make similar comments, noting that, as much as they wish it weren’t so, corporate greed has become so out of control that regulation is now a “necessary evil.”

Workers’ discussions of past and potential future efforts to end the recession and shore up the economy resonate with a shared and strong belief in the absolute necessity of a state solution. Though most have largely negative opinions of the government’s major economic efforts—bailouts, stimulus—all say that something must be done and believe that the state must take action.

**Bailouts: “What the hell kind of rescue is that?”**

Approximately a third of those I spoke with describe the U.S. government rescue of the auto and banking industries (in the form of TARP) as a terrible but necessary act. According to this group of workers, the bailouts were the only way to halt the economic freefall that began in late 2008. William explains, “Everyone was panicking and thought the economy would totally collapse if the government didn’t help.” Rodney believes the bailouts were a last resort meant to stave off disaster. He says,

I knew it was necessary. I pay a lot of attention to what’s been going on, and I saw things in a complete freefall. And I was really seriously worried that we were headed towards another depression. And I knew the President had to do something, and I think what he did was the right thing. Not necessarily—it was the lesser of two evils, I guess. Either let it go and we all be totally screwed, or bail out the banks and GM and Chrysler and make them pay us back. So, yeah. It sucks but it had to happen.
These comments reflect a general understanding and sentiment common to this group—while they believe the government bailout was the right thing to do, they are upset and disgusted that a bailout had been necessary. Like most of the workers I spoke with, Elton is angry that the banking and auto industries needed a rescue at all. He has, however, resigned himself to the fact that the government had no choice. He says, “It was bullshit that it had to happen in the first place. But it did. Because, for the stock market, you just can’t allow these kind of big companies just to fail. It’s not right that they got so bad, but once they did, we had to do something we didn’t want to. But we had to.”

Every single worker I spoke with shares Elton’s anger, but most do not share his acceptance: Approximately two thirds say the bailouts were unnecessary and unfair. Expressing significant outrage at what they view as a taxpayer funded rescue of corrupt elites, they believe that the state was wrong to take action that essentially protected powerful corporations from suffering the consequences of poor decisions and unethical practices. Sharon says, “It’s disgusting and wrong. They bankrupted the whole country and then we saved them with our hard earned money. There’s no such thing as too big to fail—they should have let them go.” Sharing his opinion of the bailout, an outraged Joe exclaims,

Bullshit is what it is! Because it's not fair to us. It's our government; it's our money that we're bailing people out with. They blew all this money and did all this stupid shit and screwed everything up in the first place! And we're the little guy, going to work everyday! And we’re savin’ their asses?! Bullshit!

While not all are as angry as Joe, every person who says the bailouts weren’t necessary describes them as unfair. Ruth’s take effectively reflects the general sentiment running through nearly all their comments on the bailouts. She says, “Rescue—what a joke. That bailout didn’t stop me or anyone else from losing our jobs. What the hell kind of rescue is that? I’ll tell you what it was. It
was a rescue for the greedy fuckers who screwed everything up. That’s the only people it helped. It sure as hell didn’t help me or anybody I know.”

Common to this group of workers is the belief that the bank and auto rescues are evidence of a corrupt relationship between business and government. Fred says he thinks TARP was passed because “somebody was in bed with somebody,” and Tony notes, “Banks and politicians all know each other and scratch each others back and give each other our taxpayer money.” In similar remarks, others say they believe that overlap between elected officials and business leaders resulted in what Richard describes as “an old buddy system where they bail out their friends and save their asses and fuck everybody else.” In comments illustrative of this broadly shared feeling, Howard explains,

> It’s because the big business is what gets politicians elected because it takes money to get elected anymore. It’s not a popularity contest anymore, it’s who has the most money. So the businesses buy the government and then the government does whatever they’re told by business. They’re all greedy as hell and they’re in it together. We’re the ones who get screwed.

**Stimulus: “The government thinks it’ll work, but it won’t.”**

Opinions of the state’s other major economic effort—the Keynesian-esque stimulus (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009)—range from hopeful to extremely cynical. About half of these workers say they are somewhat optimistic—or, at the very least, mildly hopeful—that the government’s investment will spark an economic turnaround. David says that he believes the effort could be successful because “The government has more money than anybody, so them spending some will get the ball rolling and things picking back up again.” Though slightly less optimistic than David, Susan says she is hopeful, explaining

> Well you know, it’s like it was it after World War I or World War II… When they had all those programs. That’s what it reminds me of. I think it’s a good idea to use government money where it’s needed, too. Fixing the roads and bridges and helping out states take care of some problems we’ve had for a long time while creating jobs at the same time, so I think it could work… But then again, when you think about the jobs it’ll create—There again, it’s like after World War II—construction jobs that won’t pay too much and jobs that most people couldn’t do. So I don’t know. I hope it’ll help, but I don’t know.
In contrast, half of those I spoke with have a negative view of the stimulus funding. Sharing opinions ranging from relatively pessimistic regarding success to absolutely certain of failure, they say the effort is a poor plan that stands little chance of accomplishing its goals. Many believe that the stimulus will likely fail to spark a recovery because the funds aren’t being used effectively. Ruth explains, “It won’t work because they gave the stimulus to the wrong people. I do believe. They should have given it to more of the smaller businesses because they can grow. The big businesses, they’re not going to fix the economy.” Stanley agrees that the money isn’t getting in the right hands. Though he’s seen local stimulus projects, he says he doesn’t think they’ll help the local economy much, explaining,

I don’t see them hiring any local people. I think they build these roads and stuff…they are keeping either the same city people that they had on the payroll fixing them or I’ve seen out of town companies …they’re bringing their crews from out of town to come over here. I don’t think it’s helped much locally at all.

Others say the state’s inefficiency and wastefulness will ultimately undermine the success of the stimulus effort. Elton says, “… Just throwing a bunch of money out there and doing a bad job with it isn’t going to save the economy, you know? The government thinks it’ll work, but it won’t.” Describing the stimulus as just another example of typical government inefficiency, Arthur says, “…the millions and I would probably say billions of dollars that they’ve given for stimulus, “ is wasteful because “it goes to the dumbest shit, too! Building an airport runway in the middle of nowhere and studying ants and shit. If they’d spend it right, it could really help people. But it’s the government, so what do you expect?”

Ultimately, then, although these takes on the state’s efforts to improve the economy are somewhat varied, there are clear threads of similarity running through the discussions. Workers are outraged and upset by the bailouts, which they view as an unjust use of the public funds of the many to further private interests of the few. Moreover, most take the bailouts as evidence of
the state’s prioritization of corporate interests over the interests of working people. Opinions of the stimulus effort are far more diverse and decidedly less emotional—though they consider it wasteful or ineffective, none view it as the injustice that the bailouts are. More importantly, though many believe the stimulus is bound to fail, all workers—including those who express more classical liberal ideologies of the state’s proper role—agree government action is necessary.

**Economic Interventions: “They’re gonna have to do something big … they have to.”**

Noting that previous efforts to spark recovery have been ineffective and insufficient, all say that more must be done to end the recession and shore up the economy. In their discussions of possible solutions, workers describe a host of reforms, policies, regulations, and enterprises that they believe would turn the economy around. The solutions they proffer are quite populist in that they’re united by a commonly shared belief that the government has a responsibility to take action against corruption and wealth to help working Americans. According to Lucy, “the government has to get in there and figure something out to help things get better. It’s their job. It’s what they’re there for!” Chad agrees, noting, “They can’t let [the economy] collapse … if they do, you know, then they’ve failed at their job and we’re gonna end up dependent on other foreign nations … They’re gonna have to do something big to fix things. But they have to do it.”

Like Chad and Lucy, a majority of workers say the state has a responsibility to take steps to repair the economy. Justin says the state’s role is a necessity because it the only force powerful enough to repair the market, explaining,

> They need to step in, or step up, I should say, and fix it. Because they’re the ones with the power. We can do, and say, or talk to whoever we want to try to fix this, but they’re the ones with the power that’s going to be able to fix it. Even if they do take our words, or whether they don’t take our words, they’re the ones that are going to have to fix it. We can’t, because they’re the only ones big enough to get it done.
Just under half see state enforced reform and regulation of business as the best approach to fixing the economy. Making comments much like Richard, who asserts “the only way to fix the economy is to stop them from doing what broke it in the first place,” these workers argue that the economic recovery depends on economic reform. Charles believes that the state should “crack down on the mortgage industry” and Vincent thinks there should be more oversight of Wall Street to “catch all the billions of dollars that slips through the cracks.” Similarly, others offer solutions that call for increased corporate regulation, identifying it as a much-needed reform that would spark significant growth and return billions of dollars to the economy.

Dwayne believes massive corporations are an impediment to economic growth and says that oversight would “keep them on guard and stop them from doing all these greedy, underhanded things that got us here.” Most who support regulation and corporate reform make comments similar to Dwayne, explaining that real economic recovery could only happen if something was done about the unethical business practices that had brought the economy to its knees.

Many workers mention significant tax reform as a solution that would produce major economic transformation. They say that the existing tax structure is distorted in favor of the wealthy, which pay too little in taxes, at the expense of everyone else, who pay too much. All who identify tax reform as an economic solution agree that the wealthy should pay higher taxes. Exclaiming, “Tax the rich!” Joe laughs and says, “I mean it though. The super rich, they don’t pay near as much as they should. Some don’t even pay anything! The government needs to do something about it, too. I’d make a big difference.” Burt agrees that the wealthy should pay higher taxes, as he explains, “I don’t see why they can’t pay more. They got more! There’s no way that a billionaire should have the same tax rate as me. Not fair. I say make them pay a higher percentage. Then we can use that money to build the economy.” Like Burt and Joe, most of those
who call for tax reform say that higher taxes for the wealthy would result in more money for education, research and innovation, and would, ultimately, create jobs and economic growth.

Again, while it’s hardly surprising that those who support embedded liberal policies (regulation, state management of public goods etc.) believe that the state must intervene in the economy, it is somewhat interesting that all who express a commitment to a limited form of government power agree. In their explanations of this seeming contradiction, these workers say that they believe the economic crisis is an extraordinary circumstance that calls for extraordinary measures. Dwayne explains, “Well, the government is supposed to protect this country, and the economy being so bad is a real threat to everything, including our safety. So I think this calls for government action.” In an explanation illustrative of comments made by others who share this perspective, Gary says,

Normally I would say the government needs to stay out of things, but this isn’t normal. They’re the only ones big enough to tackle such a huge problem, so they have to do it. It’s like the saying, “with great power comes great responsibility”—Normally for the government, I’d say responsibility means to limit your power. But things are so bad that is a time when responsibility means the government needs to use that power.

IN THEORY AND IN REALITY: NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGY IN ELKHART

Examining individuals’ thoughts on the nature and purpose of economic order, individual merit, and state power makes it clear that neoliberal ideology is very much a powerful reality for RV workers. Overall, neoliberalism’s fundamental incorporation of the U.S. core cultural value of freedom is a large reason it is such a successful ideology. For an ideology to be ultimately effective, it must resonate with “institutions and instincts … values and desires…” (Harvey 2005:5). Given that neoliberal thought does exactly that, it is not surprising that most workers agree that capitalism furnishes freedom and view individual liberty as supremely important. The ideology’s conflation of freedom and capitalism explains why a large proportion hold a reverence for minimally regulated free markets as ideal and patriotic, and concomitantly, why a
number of people view the U.S. government as a threat to liberty. The paradigm’s integration of traditional cultural understandings of individual merit and success naturalizes the centrality of market exchange and eschewal of collectivities (unions, the state) to great effect: Most believe work is purifying and a moral obligation and see market success as a measure of individual value.

Again, this ideological belief is not new to U.S. culture, as, “in modern societies money is central to the evaluation of the moral worth of individuals. The careful management of one’s wealth is not just economically rational but an index of one’s moral responsibility” (Fourcade and Healy 2007:20). Indeed, most of the workers I spoke with say poverty is an individual matter and most do not countenance suggestions of collective responsibility (or action) for something they believe is the result of a significant moral failing. Moreover, the deep resonance between hegemonic ideology and longstanding core community values—entrepreneurialism, work, individualism—further naturalizes neoliberalism and heightens the obvious “common sense” appeal of neoliberal logic. RV workers’ comments are strong evidence for the (quite Gramscian) understanding that, “to be effective [ideological] representations must have a kernel of truth or at least a plausible claim to efficacy in addressing personal and political problems” (McGuigan 2005:23).

However, although workers largely subscribe to some of the perspective’s fundamental tenets, it is important to avoid the assumption that those who accept parts of hegemonic ideology are imbued with a consciousness they have “inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed” (Gramsci 1971:333) so prevalent in many treatments of hegemony. Talking with workers reveals that it would be a significant mistake to assume that, in Elkhart, neoliberal ideological hegemony is “absolute” (McKenna 2004). Indeed, their discussions indicate that individuals are somewhat
more accepting of neoliberalism in “theory” than in “reality”: Workers agree that free market
capitalism is ideal and a fundamentally fair economic order—in theory—but reject the notion
that capitalism works as it should in reality. While most accept the neoliberal contention that
success and failure are essentially the result of individual effort and merit, a significant
proportion say that structural conditions have distorted the true nature of achievement.

Similarly, while many generally agree with the neoliberal perspective’s fundamental
distrust of state power and vision of limited government, they say that existing conditions make
such a state form largely untenable. Many make it clear that the 2008 financial crisis ruptured
their ideological worldviews, forever altering their visions of economic and political order. Most
say that the crisis opened their eyes to reality that capitalism isn’t as fair as it’s supposed to be,
that social forces cause poverty, and that the state should play a larger role in the economy.
Ultimately, then, for these individuals, the crisis made it clear that neoliberalism is correct
theory, but far less so in reality.

It is hardly surprising that individuals make a distinction between the ideologies they
affirm ‘in theory’ but do not subscribe to ‘in reality.’ As a form of understanding used to explain
and legitimate the ever-changing social world, hegemonic ideology is not, says Gramsci, “rigid
and immobile, but is continually transforming itself” (1971:326). This understanding of
ideological hegemony—as a “common sense” frame used to understand the ever-shifting social
world—explains workers’ distinction between ideal forms and existing possibilities. In essence,
RV workers’ simultaneous embrace of neoliberal ideology and desire for populist policy and
action give us clear insight into exactly how ideology functions. Rather than a “top-down” vision
of social order blindly accepted and willingly adhered to by docile dupes, it an ongoing social
negotiation—a complex, contradictory, and ever-changing response to lived experiences and the
organization of daily (Fantasia 1988; Vallas 1991; Vallas 2006; Morgen and Gonzales 2008). As this exploration of ideology and the following chapters’ detailing RV of workers’ entrepreneurialism in very different economic climates demonstrate, ideology must be understood as an ever-changing, negotiated frame for thought and behavior.

The financial crisis and subsequent recession have been the most significant challenge to neoliberal economic, political, and ideological hegemony to date: The events of late 2008 brought about a major electoral shift in the U.S., stimulated calls for economic reform among policymakers, and significantly disrupted individuals’ ideological frames. Is it possible, then, the populist threads in workers’ “reality” ideologies represent a delegitimation of neoliberal thought and practice? Although there’s little question that workers’ comments illuminate fissures in neoliberal ideological hegemony, it is important not to overstate the significance of this ideological disjuncture between ‘theory’ and ‘reality.’ Neoliberal ideology is by no means absent from workers’ ‘reality’ ideologies. This is evident in their discussions of poverty and individual merit: Not only do most believe that economic success is determined by individual effort, even those who allow for structural sources ultimately reassert their conviction that success and failure are up to individuals. Also, although most workers believe the state has a role to play in regulating business and managing public resources, few are happy that this is so.

Moreover, not only are workers doubtful of the state’s ability to take effective action, many are profoundly disillusioned by and distrustful of their government and elected leaders. Ultimately, then, rather than inspiring workers to contest or reject neoliberal hegemonic ideology and practice, this ideological disruption between ‘theory’ and ‘reality’ actually functions to effectively romanticize neoliberalism by causing individuals to idealize the way things “should be” but aren’t. These workers see the state as a ‘necessary evil,’ depict populist solutions as a
‘last resort,’ and believe that ‘things aren’t they way they should be’—as they are in theory and as they would be in an ideal neoliberal world.
CHAPTER SIX: NAVIGATING CRISIS

“Everything’s been bad...just really bad. No jobs, more crime, and people losing everything. It’s the worst I’ve ever seen it here—worse than after a tornado, because at least a tornado doesn’t keeping going on and on for years and years,” says Sean, a 36 year old father of three. Laid off over a year ago for the first time in his 18 years working in RV’s, Sean has been unable to find work—a story that, he explains, is not exceptional: “It’s me, it’s my brother, it’s my neighbor. It’s everyone. We’re all the same. Doing whatever we can to survive.” In a community where nearly one in five workers has been laid off for at least six months, these sentiments and experiences are, of course, by no means unique—there are thousands of people like Sean, doing all they can to pay their mortgage, find work, provide for their families, and simply get by as the recession lingers.

Facing a dramatically different employment landscape, Elkhart’s RV workers have found themselves adapting their lifestyles, practices, expectations, and perceptions in order to navigate this new world. As Karen, 38, explains over an early morning coffee, “We have to be different. That’s just the fact of it. We’re learning to live a different way, and that’s how it’s going to be.” Karen, a lifelong Elkhart resident with 20 years of RV experience who has been out of work for nearly two years, acknowledges that change “hasn’t been easy,” and continues, “But we’re doing it. And it will make us better, eventually.” When asked about Elkhart’s recessionary experiences and strategies, Sean, Karen, and the majority of RV workers interviewed voiced the common understanding that life and work going forward would be very, very different and that—whether they like it or not—workers must transform and improve themselves in order to survive.
In this chapter, I examine Elkhart RV workers’ responses to unemployment and searching for work during recession. After detailing the common consequences associated with long-tern unemployment and detailing the RV industry meltdown and mass layoffs, I explore the search for employment in a bleak economic landscape and examine the new world of work facing those who have returned to the factory. The values that were relatively liberating during the “good times” discussed in the previous chapter now inspire self-blame, pressure, and, ultimately, disempowerment. In addition to pointing to their own earlier wastefulness as a cause of economic suffering, workers identify individual effort and transformation as their best means of survival and success in finding and keeping work. As a result, they devote a great deal of their time and energy to efforts that will make them more “employable” rather than seeking and demanding the significant structural changes or collective solutions that would more effectively reduce employment precarity.

THE TOLL OF UNEMPLOYMENT

There’s no question that the financial crisis and subsequent recession took a significant toll on the U.S. economy: The national unemployment rate more than doubled in less than two years, and the jobseeker to vacancy ratio quickly hit an all time high: By the winter of 2009-2010, there were approximately six jobseekers for every one open position (Hourt, Levanon, Cumberworth 2011). The decline hit Elkhart even faster and harder: In April 2008, 5% of U.S. and 5% of Elkhart workers were unemployed. By March 2009, 8.7% of U.S. adults were out of work—in Elkhart, that number was 20% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009a). Workers who found themselves out of a job during and in the aftermath of the financial crisis lost routinely say feeling as if “it all happened so fast,” and they’re not wrong—quadrupling in under a year, the
unemployment rate remained persistently and troublingly high (above 10%) for another two years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

One of the most remarkably taxing elements of the “Great Recession” has been the issue of long-term unemployment. In early 2010, the number of Americans who’d been unemployed for more than 26 weeks reached 7 million—more than the total number of out-of-work Americans before the recession. In past recessions, unemployed workers experienced an average of 20 out of work—during the recent downturn, the unemployed experienced an average of 35 weeks of unemployment (Farber 2011). In fact, long-term unemployment was so widespread that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics modified its survey question asking about unemployment to allow respondents to indicate more than two years without work (Freeman 2013). The U.S. Congress addressed this problem of long-term unemployment by creating the temporary Emergency Unemployment Compensation program in 2008 (and later modified in 2012), which extended the amount of time unemployed workers would receive federal unemployment benefits. When regular state unemployment benefits expired after 26 weeks, federal unemployment compensation kicked in, bringing the total amount of time a worker in Indiana is eligible to receive unemployment benefits to 99 weeks (Rothstein 2011; Casselman 2013; Isaacs and Whittaker 2014)—a particularly crucial development for Indiana’s RV workers, as manufacturing workers tend to endure longer bouts of unemployment than those from other industries (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). Long-term unemployment increases the difficulty of re-entering the labor market and tends to intensify many of the negative emotions associated with being out of work.

**Job Loss and Unemployment: Financial and Emotional Strain**
Finances tend to present a major challenge for workers navigating the labor market. Unemployment—particularly long-term unemployment—takes a significant financial toll on workers’ savings and incomes (Ruhm 1991; Bambra 2011; Couch and Placzek 2010; Davis and von Wachter 2012; Carrington and Fallick 2015). Workers, on average, lose 33 percent of earnings upon layoff and, moreover, continue to feel the effects of job loss in their pocketbooks for several years (Couch and Placzek 2010; Davis and von Wachter 2012). Layoffs have significant long-term consequences for workers’ earning potential—the cumulative earnings loss in a lifetime due to a layoff is approximately 20 percent (Brand and von Wachter 2013).

It is not uncommon for U.S. workers to attribute job loss to a personal failing and face significant shame and stigma when unemployed (Hamilton et al 1993; Turner 1995, Sharone 2013; Briar et al 2014; Manroop and Richardson 2015; Lassus, Lopez, and Roscigno 2015). Work is central to U.S. cultural constructions of personal fulfillment, social status, and moral worth (Terkel 1974; Rantakeisu, Starrin, and Hagquist 1999; Newman 2009). More than just a paycheck, employment imparts various substantial benefits, from a sense of control and self esteem to social interactions, the disciplined use of time, and the opportunity to develop skills and capabilities (Warr 1987; Wilson 1996; Frey and Stutzer 2002; Sen 2009). It is exceedingly common for U.S. workers to attribute job loss to a personal failing and experience significant shame and stigmatization when they’re out of work (Hamilton et al 1993; Turner 1995, Sharone 2013; Briar et al 2014; Manroop and Richardson 2015; Lassus, Lopez, and Roscigno 2015). As such, it is of little surprise that unemployment—particularly long-term unemployment—causes major strain in the lives of workers. In addition to financial hardship, unemployment presents significant emotional and interpersonal challenges that are often extremely difficult to navigate (Brand, Levy and Gallo 2008; Brand and Von Wachter 2013). Displaced workers experience
higher levels of depression and anxiety due to lowered self-esteem, the loss of a sense of control, heightened apathy and idleness, and lowered self-confidence (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005). More recent research on the toll of unemployment has found that Americans out of work for six months or longer are disproportionately likely to experience lowered self-respect, marital strain, and lowered expectations for the future (Morin and Kochhar 2010).

Other emotional consequences of unemployment include identity loss, confusion, and embarrassment—all feelings that are common among the long-term unemployed (Liu 2002; Bambra 2011; Ali, Fall, and Hoffman 2013; Briar 2014; Brand 2015). The common feelings purposelessness and the disruption caused by unemployment can be an extremely stressful combination of experiences and feelings that can have deleterious effects on mental and even physical health. (Parnes and King 1977; Jahoda 1982; Dooley and Catalano 1988; Clark, Georgellis, and Sanfeyal 2001; McKee-Ryan et. al 2005; Catalano et. al 2011). Psychologists who study work have found that job loss and long-term unemployment may result in a full-blown identity crisis. Bluestein (2006) posits that losing a job means losing the social status that enables access to material and non-material resources, including relationships, one’s role in their family, and prestige. These losses cause power dynamics to shift, and, ultimately, may result in identity crisis when an unemployed person believes that they are unable to fulfill the requirements of their ideal role (Liu 2002; Willott and Griffin 2004; Bluestein 2006; Bluestein, Kozan, and Connors-Kellgren 2013). Overall, then, job loss and unemployment constitute a profound life event that takes a significant financial and emotional toll on workers and their families. Those navigating the labor market in search of work must carefully manage their finances and energies while at the same time doing what they can to increase their employability, ‘sell’ themselves to potential employers, and manage the difficult emotions associated with
RV INDUSTRY MELTDOWN

Though downturns in the 1990’s and early 2000’s had caused dips in RV shipments, the industry continued to add jobs in these years. Losses were modest, and recovery was immediate and strong. Sales figures each year between 2001 and 2006 broke new ground and a record 390,500 new units shipped in 2006, making it the most profitable year in RV history (Odendahl 2009). This success was rooted in rising home values, easily accessible credit, and low interest rates, as droves of American consumers refinanced their homes and withdrew equity to purchase RV’s. Adding to this boom was the federal government’s purchase of 145,000 RV’s to house the victims of Hurricane Katrina (FEMA Trailers, Five Years After Katrina Hit U.S. 2010). Since the 1980’s, and particularly since 2001, strong growth, industry expansion, and high incomes were RV industry norms, and, in turn, prosperity was a dominant norm in Elkhart. Thus, when rising gas prices and the end of the federal contract resulted in a small decline in 2007, most observers weren’t terribly concerned. Although manufacturers slightly slowed production and cut costs to mitigate the impact of what they thought would be a slow 2008, local unemployment hovered around 5% and workers didn’t experience any cutbacks in their wages or hours. Even the most circumspect forecasts did not prepare the industry for the disaster to come.

When the burst of the housing bubble and implosion of credit markets dramatically slowed the U.S. economy, the RV industry and Elkhart’s economy fell off a cliff. Because “items like RVs are often the most vulnerable to downturns because they are easy to put off,” RV sales plummeted (Schriener and Strump 2008). Baby Boomers, the core RV demographic, suffered huge hits to their investments, 401Ks, and home values, and were left with little discretionary income. By 2009, RV sales had plummeted 65 percent from the height reached in 2006.
(Odendahl 2009). This huge decline in revenue and the frozen credit markets found manufacturers unable to access capital to cover costs, pay debts, and fund investments. Manufacturers, suppliers, and dealers shed thousands of jobs and major players like San Marco Corp. and RapidRoad Enterprises entered bankruptcy protection. Manufacturers, including Plymouth RV and Chariot Coach, and many more dealers and suppliers went out of business completely (Odendahl 2009). Survivors consolidated operations by eliminating product lines, closing plants, and cutting jobs. Larger and more stable companies acted aggressively to acquire vulnerable operations. The crisis resulted in the largest industry consolidation since the 1970’s, and experts note that the 2008 crisis and subsequent recession outstripped all other downturns both in magnitude and in transformative consequences.

**Job Loss: “It was a surprise, to say the least”**

This transformation hit Elkhart’s workers quickly and painfully: In January 2008 the local unemployment rate was approximately 5.3 percent and by December it reached 15.1%. Unemployment had tripled in less than a year and continued to climb, reaching 20% in March 2009 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009a). The speed of the disaster left many reeling and in shock—the meltdown was, as Pamela put it, “like a punch out of nowhere.” The overwhelming majority of the workers I spoke with say they were extremely surprised to be out of work. Most in shock were workers who’d been employed by manufacturers that had gone out of business entirely during the meltdown. Pamela, who’d worked in final finish at San Marco for 15 years, describes getting the news of the company shutdown:

> We were all so upset—in a state of shock. We knew that things had been slow, but that’d happened before. So one day, the managers called us altogether and told us that it was over. And the managers didn’t know until like the day before. It was a well-kept secret. People were crying. And by that time, when they said they were closing the doors in two weeks, I didn’t even know what to think. And, um, I mean, everybody was just—girls were crying. Everybody was totally in a state of shock. Just totally.
A number of others who’d worked for other manufacturers share similar experiences. Anita had been working at Frontier for five years when she found out that the company was shutting down. She explains, “They came and gave us our checks and told us that was it. It was the last check. They said that we were shutting down in a month because of the economy. I couldn’t believe it.” Richard, a worker with 30 years of experience in RV’s who’d spent the last six years working as a plant manager at Plymouth, relates, “I was surprised. Not expectin’ it. They just said, uh…that they were gonna shut the doors and go out of business. I didn’t know until about a week before.” Upon getting this shocking news, Richard was tasked with letting Plymouth workers know that they’d be out of a job in less than a week. Describing this burden, he says, “I had to tell everybody that it was going down. That was the worst thing I’ve ever had to do—no notice, no help. Called them altogether and broke it, and people were in shock. I didn’t know what to say.” Ken, a line worker at Imprint, was on the receiving end of the type of news that Richard broke to his Plymouth employees. Explaining the experience, he reports:

Well, when they broke the news to us last April, it was kind of a shock to everybody. It was kind of a shock to all the employees though. I miss it though. I miss it. It was pretty much a shock to everybody. At first I couldn’t – nobody could believe it. They just thought it was an April Fool’s joke. Uh, oh, about the middle of April they called...I had just clocked out at about 11:30 that day for lunch, at about 12:00 in the afternoon, they called us employees up to the front of the building. They had broken the news to us that the place was going to be going out of business in about two months.

The shock of job loss was not limited to those working at plants that went out of business. A number of workers note that even though they were aware that cutbacks were coming, but hadn’t expected to lose their jobs. Chad, who’s worked in cabinetry at various RV plants for 15 years, explains that, in his case:

They cut our hours, and cut our hours. And, to where we just some week we put in 20 hours, some week we put in 17 hours. You weren’t making much, but you were getting by, you know? And then one day they called my group to the floor and told us we were laid off. They didn’t know if we’d be called back. I was so mad. I thought we’d stay on, but nope.
Randall, laid off after 42 years in the industry, experienced similar surprise. He explains, “I was pretty surprised because even though things were tough, I didn't figure it would be my plant. We were running five a day so I figured it would be another plant that was only running three and four a day, you know?” Donna, an upholsterer at RiverBend for eight years, was “Just flabbergasted...” because, she says, “…I didn’t expect it at all. I know we slowed down in the wintertime…you know, instead of being 40 hours a week, it would be 28 to 30 hours. But we were coming into summer months and I’d survived the cutbacks, so I didn’t see it coming.” Each of the workers who spoke with me note that the economic crisis was cited as the cause of their layoff—whether their employer had gone under completely or had simply made significant cutbacks, all were told that the economy was to blame for their job loss. All share a variant of the explanation that was given to Dean, who recalls, “Well, basically they said it was because of the economy, the way that the economy’s been going, right now they don’t need our services anymore, but we’ll definitely be called back to work as soon as it picks up again. Which, we all knew, was – pardon my French – a load of BS. You know, because nobody that’s been laid off has received a call back to work yet.”

Apart from a small handful of workers like Luke, who wasn’t surprised at his layoff “Because we saw everything getting slower and gas prices kept going up and production started slowing down, so I saw it coming,” the overwhelming majority of workers say they were somewhat stunned by their job loss. Though aware that the economy had been struggling, layoffs and shutdowns were so uncommon in the RV industry that most simply didn’t expect they would ever experience such a thing. Accustomed to the “employee’s market” that had been the industry norm for so long, these workers hadn’t experienced job loss and simply didn’t expect that they ever would. Alan notes, “I hadn’t been laid off for the 25 years I was there. So it was a surprise,
to say the least.” According to Jack, “Nobody saw it coming because nobody had ever been laid off before. The news talks and everything, but it never felt like it would happen to us until it did happen. And we sure as hell weren’t ready.”

Indeed, woven through RV workers’ accounts of their layoffs is a notable dearth of the guilt and self-blame that regularly colors job-loss narratives—an absence easily explained by the overarching crisis responsible for their unemployment. When asked if they felt any personal responsibility for what had happened, all of the workers I spoke with emphatically said that they did not. Reporting that they were, as Jack says, “Hard workers hit with bad times,” the RV workers I spoke with universally agree that it was the economy—not their own performances—that had cost them their jobs. Karen, a 38-year-old mother of two with twenty years of RV experience, explains, “I mean, I know I’m good at my job. I’ve done it so long that I know how to do it, I know what the quickest, easiest way and I do good work. So when they came to me and said you’re laid off, it just like blew me over, but I knew it wasn’t my fault.” Most share similar sentiments, explaining that that their job loss doesn’t mean that they aren’t good at what they do. According to Carl, losing his job in the cabinet shop at EverSport “Didn’t mean nothing, because the economy. I do good work. We all do good work. Our bosses even told us that when they let us go. It’s like, “it’s not you, it’s me,” you know?” Laughing, he says, “Like breaking-up, you know? But in this case, it’s the truth. It’s like, “It’s not you, it’s the economy.””

All of the workers I spoke with had either lost their jobs as part of a mass layoff or plant shut down—a point raised by several workers. Rodney, a 49-year-old worker with 27 years of RV experience says, “It was all of us—the entire chassis shop. And when that happens you know that it isn’t because you’re no good or this other guy messed up. It’s because the company’s hurtin’.” According to Vincent, a 38-year-old father of one who lost his job when Lakeland shut
down. “Thing is, it was all of us. Not the new guy or the old guy. Everyone. Even people that have been there thirty years, man. We’re all in the same boat. Screwed, but screwed together.” Like Rodney, Vincent, and a number of others, Pamela shares this comfort in being one of many, pointing out “It’s kinda nice. I mean, it’s not nice to be out of work, but… I mean it’s good that it’s not just me. It’s 1300 of us at my place. We’re good workers but we couldn’t keep the place running if the bosses weren’t selling, you know?” While there’s no question that these workers aren’t happy to be out of a job and, the fact that they are not alone—that they are part of a much larger economic decline—helps alleviate the blame and shame often associated with job loss (Turner 1995; Lassus, Lopez, and Roscigno 2015). These workers benefit from representing what is “normal” in Elkhart: Good, hard workers who, through no fault of their own, are now out of a job—along with everybody else.

Largely unaccustomed to anything less than an ever-expanding market and almost entirely untouched by layoffs and plant closures, Elkhart’s RV workers were left jobless and reeling by the crisis and recession. The magnitude and speed of the meltdown did, however, moderate some small part of the pain for these workers: By hitting so quickly and essentially razing their entire industry, the economic disaster negated the feelings of individual shame and isolation normally associated with job loss. Likening the situation to a natural disaster, a number of workers say that the crisis had affected everything in its path. Randall explains,

Cause in other recessions, it was other people. It was other people, so it wasn't in your back door. It would normally be housing, or start out with that and kind of trickle down through the economy. Whereas with this, it's everything. You know, in the past, it could've been like a tornado. With a tornado, well, it hits here and here and here. But some houses or some cities are OK. With this, it's a hurricane—it wiped out all of us. Took everything. And now we have to figure out how to clean up and start over.

THE DAILY REALITIES OF RECESSIONARY LIFE

It is, of course, no simple task to “clean up and start over.” Though the height of the crisis has passed, workers find themselves struggling to navigate the new reality of post-meltdown
live. It is, according to every person I spoke with, no simple task. “It’s like up is down and left is right or something,” says Rodney, explaining, “Everything is different, and I mean everything. We’re all just trying to figure out what’s what.” These feelings are not at all unique to Rodney—most agree that they’re living in what Richard and several others say is a “new world” where they have little choice but to “do whatever it takes to get by,” as Ryan puts it. According to these workers, “whatever it takes to get by” includes a host of things that are unfamiliar, unpleasant, and unfair—from drawing unemployment benefits, financial stress, and depression, to searching, applying, and interviewing for jobs in an employment context full of new requirements and expectations, these individuals must face a number of difficult obstacles as they navigate the post-meltdown world.

**Unemployment Insurance: “My biggest concern is doing it right”**

Unemployment benefits are central to workers’ ability to survive the economic disaster. All of the RV workers I spoke with had filed for and drawn unemployment benefits upon losing their jobs. Approximately 15% of workers had completely exhausted available benefits, 60% were on their first federal extension, and the rest were on their second (and final) federal extension. Many people say that they are frustrated and outraged that the system isn’t easier to navigate and more accommodating to their needs. Unaccustomed to filing for and receiving income from the state, workers say that the process has been difficult and frustrating. Bruce explains, “Yeah, yeah it was...it’s like, I’ve never done it before. I never had to. I’ve always had a job, my whole life, so what do I do? It’s been a massive bitch, to be honest. Stupid.” Sharing similar feelings, a number of workers note that the unemployment system is far more confusing and troublesome than they expected.
Several agree with Randall’s assertion that “Unemployment is kinda tricky.” According to some, filing for unemployment online is a source of multiple troubles. Mike says, “It’s a hassle because people our age really don’t know a whole bunch about computers. We’re not computer people…. it’s like how you, you can set there and texting and all that stuff, and it takes us forever to spell words out. We, we’re not…We’re not just into it.” Noting that online filing is extremely unforgiving, several workers explain that one typo or missed answer created a world of problems for them. Pointing out that the Work One website “sucks,” Donna says, “It really does, because if you make a mistake on it, you’re screwed. You really are.” About one third of the workers I spoke with say that they, like Donna, have made mistakes when filing. Susan, who describes the online system as “very primitive and unforgiving,” says, “If you make a mistake you can’t fix it yourself. And then if you have to get on the phone and you can’t get through. You have to call Indy. And then that takes forever to get through to Indy. You’re on the phone, on the phone, on the phone…”

For some, mistakes in filing had very severe consequences, as Justin explains, “You hit a wrong key and it’s over. You don’t get no money that week.” Seven of the workers I spoke with had this experience—upon making a mistake in filing, they’d lost benefits and gone without money for a period of time. Describing his distressing experience, Don says:

I screwed up the online thing because I forgot to hit “done,” so I called. Then, of course, you can't get through to anybody. And then when I did get through to somebody, it took me a good hour, or hour and a half staying on the phone trying to get ahold of somebody, and then it took however long for them to fix it. I didn’t get anything for three weeks, and then, by the time you actually got your money, it's already too late, and you're already behind, and it was just kind of frustrating.

Though most didn’t have major problems navigating the system, nearly all of the workers I spoke with express significant anxiety about, as several workers put it, “doing it right.” Helen explains, “My biggest concern is doing it right. Because if you mess it up, they stop your check or you get in trouble.” This widely shared anxiety is inspired by poor communication and ever-
changing requirements. As the recession wears on and new federal extensions are passed, the state continues to implement changes in filing processes and rules. According to most, Work One doesn’t warn—or even directly inform—those receiving benefits about changes and new requirements. Samantha says, “They’re making all these changes, and nobody tells you. No call or email or anything. You have to stay on top of it or you’re screwed. And it’s bullshit, because that’s their job. We paid this money in, and they can’t do better?” A number of workers agree with Robert’s assertion that “It can be really confusing trying to keep up with everything…trying to understand what new thing they’re asking and get it done in time. Because nobody tells you. You gotta find out for yourself.”

Most say they were only able to learn out about the new requirements through watching or reading news reports. Dennis explains,

Actually, I got nothing. I heard a little bit of what was going on with the new changes, but I didn't get a letter or any notification, or... I didn't hear anything at all really. And we don't have satellite, so it was hard for me to catch the news. I tried to catch it on the digital TV that everybody had now, but it's hard to get reception. So now I at least go to my neighbor’s every week to check the news.

Like Dennis, many say that they have made a habit of regularly checking the news to keep up with the latest information related to their benefits, as they are worried about making a mistake that could cost them the only income they have. Jason says, “I was never really much into watching the news, but you better believe I do now. Nobody tells you what’s comin’, so you have to stay on it.” “It’s just confusing, period,” says Lucy. “I think they don’t tell us because they want us to lose benefits so it’ll save them money.” Unaware of new requirements attached to the second federal extension, Theresa made a mistake on her weekly job search report and was in her second week without benefits when we spoke. She shares Lucy’s frustration and skepticism, noting, “It’s just the government likes playing with your lives and your money. They make rules and don’t tell anybody, and there you go. You know, I mean right now I’m going on
my second week of no money. So it’s like…I’d like to go up and changes the rules of their jobs and see how they feel about it.”

Although many had few problems filing for and receiving unemployment benefits, they say that the process of doing so has been a source of significant frustration. Aware that a simple mistake or failure to keep current with new requirements could result in their losing their only source of income, workers have learned to be extremely methodical in their weekly filings and to take responsibility for staying fully informed of constantly changing procedures and rules. “It’s crazy,” says Arthur, “How long it takes to do something that should be so simple. But it's up to you to make sure you’re doing it right, or else you’re outta luck.” Many made similar comments, noting that although they hadn’t had any problems, they found themselves “checking and double-checking,” as Mark says, to ensure they were doing exactly what was necessary to stay afloat in the system. According to Mark, the system is unreasonably unforgiving and, as he says, “an example of how bad the state fucks things up.” He explains, “If they were doing it right, it wouldn’t be such a pain in the ass. They’d tell us about what we need to do. But that’s how the state is. They can’t do anything right.” Others share Mark’s outrage, expressing anger that the system isn’t better managed and easier to navigate. “It’s lousy,” says Gerald, noting, “We paid for this system, we have a right to it, and they treat us like we’re idiots or cheats. It’s not right.”

It has long been recognized that the cultural emphasis on individualism and independence in the U.S. has made Americans somewhat loath to rely on the state for resources (Bellah et al 1996). Indeed, the idea of self-sufficiency is such a core cultural belief that there are strong stigmas attached to receiving most forms of public assistance (Gans 1996; Sherman 2006; 2009; Seccombe 2010). Many of the workers I spoke with view social goods such as income assistance and food stamps in an overwhelmingly negative way, but do not view unemployment benefits in
the same way. In fact, although unhappy to be unemployed and reliant on a state agency for income, none of the workers who spoke with me are ashamed to be drawing unemployment benefits. “I earned this,” explains Gerald. “I paid into unemployment all these years,” This understanding—that unemployment benefits are something owed to workers—is shared again and again by those I spoke with. “It’s not like I’m on welfare,” says Karen, explaining, “It’s not assistance, it’s my right. I earned this money, so the state had better give it to me.” Most, like Karen, say that they have earned their unemployment benefits, noting that they are now receiving a return on the money that they and their employers have paid into the state over the years. “It’s called unemployment insurance for a reason,” says Joe, noting, “We’ve paid for it.”

This argument—that workers have paid into the system and are merely reaping a just return on their investment—saves workers from feeling shame about receiving assistance. The shared understanding that these benefits are something to which they are entitled resolves potential dissonance between workers’ prominent individualism and the fact that they’re now reliant on the state for financial survival. In fact, workers’ individualism is somewhat prominent in their discussions of filing for and receiving benefits. I have a right to these benefits and I have a right to get them without too much hassle,” explains Nick, noting, “It pisses me and a lot of people off, I know, that it doesn’t work better. We earned it.” Alan agrees, saying, “No, I ain’t ashamed to be on unemployment. They should be ashamed of how they run it, though. We earned the right to our benefits without too much hassle and they can’t even properly deliver what they owe us.” Others make similar comments, sharing their anger at a system they feel isn’t living up to what they’re entitled to. According to Harold, “It’s just hard. You gotta be really, really careful every time you deal with [the unemployment process] or one mistake will cost you.
It’s a pain in the ass and just another thing to worry about, like we don’t have more than enough to worry about as it is.”

Financial Strain: “Worried about money all the time … never not worried”

It is, then, hardly surprising that financial difficulties were the most commonly cited struggle faced by laid-off RV workers. When asked to describe the most difficult part of being unemployed, all of the workers I spoke with commented on the difficulty of getting by on their income from unemployment benefits. From struggling to make mortgage payments or rent to being unable to afford to repair a broken car or cover their monthly bills, workers agree that financial difficulties are their biggest source of stress.

Married couple Mike and Anita are laid off—Anita’s been out of work for eight months, and Mike was unemployed for six months before being called back to work recently. Describing their financial stress, Anita says, “We called all our people that we have loans and stuff from and said hey, this is what’s going on. Tried to work with them.” Nodding his agreement, Mike says,

Yeah some worked with us, but one, they wouldn’t work with me at all. But guess what I told them? I just told them, right off the bat…OK, this guy was griping at me over the phone. Because they gave it to a creditor…OK, so this creditor’s griping at me over the phone…listen, I know you can make at least a 100 dollar payment. With what? I was trying to explain to him that I was LAID OFF from work. I have no income coming in—

—“He said, “Well you get unemployment, I know that,” Anita says, interrupting her husband. Outraged, she continues, “Well, fuck that, unemployment is really almost nothing!” “Yeah” agrees Mike, and continues,

He was sitting here asking all these questions…OK, how much do you make here, how much you pay for this, how much you pay for that? Well he added it all up and said Mr. Byrd, I don’t know how you can pay for all this stuff, but the least you can do is at least give us some money for what you owe here. I tried to explain to them, Elkhart County is the RV capital of the world, we have NO JOBS, NO MONEY, NO INCOME. They wouldn’t even listen.

Anita chimes in, noting, “Yeah, we even tried to tell them – get on the internet…Find Elkhart, you know, get on the internet. They don’t care. They’re so heartless…they are, they’re so
heartless.” Several workers share similar tales of arguing with, and eventually avoiding bill collectors. Talking to them “just ruins your day,” says Nick. Donna notes, “You put things off…you don’t open your mail. You don’t answer your phone. Because you know it’s the bill collectors and you ain’t got it. It’s very stressful.” Many echo Donna’s comments, noting that constant worry about finances has taken a significant toll on their daily lives. According to Ryan, “It’s like you’re worried about money all the time. You’re never not worried.” A number of others agree that their financial struggles occupy their minds constantly, and say that they feel as if this anxiety has taken over their lives. “It affects everything,” says Fred, “and I mean everything.”

Gary is on his second federal extension of unemployment benefits and finds he feels constantly stressed and without an outlet. “You can’t go out and do anything, you can’t get away because you can’t afford it. It’s like I don’t see anyone but my wife anymore.” A great many workers share their similar feelings, explaining that their reduced finances make it difficult to socialize or engage in the activities—camping, traveling, dining out—that they love. Nathan notes, “I’m not able to do the things I used to do…I don’t get out much. Job searching stuff is about the only thing that takes me out anymore. I’m too stressed about money to ever have fun” According to Chad, “You can’t plan on anything, you can’t plan to go do anything, ‘cause you gotta keep your money to pay your bills. There’s no extra money at all to go to the fairs or have much fun.” Nearly all of those I spoke with say that, in addition to making it difficult to get by, the financial struggle of being unemployed limits their ability to simply enjoy life. Elton explains,

Well, yeah, you gotta be careful about everything, but I mean…you miss everything. I mean…you haven’t got the dollar to go out there and do the cookout with your daughter. You haven’t got the dollar to do out there and do the cookout with your son. Everything hurts.
These comments reflect the well-established understanding that the financial hardships associated with unemployment are the source of significant stress (McKee-Ryan et al. 2005; Gallo et al. 2006; Bambra, 2011). The workers I spoke with understood this truth all too well, noting that their never-ending worries over finances had a significant negative influence on their day-to-day lives: Joe explains, “It puts a cramp on goin’ and doin’. You miss bein’ out and around everybody and just livin’ life and you feel bad, like you shoulda’ known better, shoulda’ been ready.”

Joe’s note that he feels as if he should have been ready to live on less reflects a common regret and self-blame shared by many in their discussions of the financial challenges of unemployment. A number of workers say that they feel somewhat guilty for being so unprepared to live on less. “It’s like the grasshopper that sang all winter or whatever,” says Anita. “We were runnin’ and we didn’t think it’d ever end.” Her husband Mike agrees, noting, “Yeah, I know a lot of people are in the same boat. We all thought there’d always be more money, so nobody saved, nobody prepared.” Mike and Anita regret their previous lifestyle to a certain extent, as Anita explains, “We partly to blame, I know that. For not planning ahead.” Expressing similar self-blame, a number of others say that they’re now quite sorry for not thinking ahead. Pointing out that “Times were so good, we didn’t ever know it would come to this,” Sam says, “And I know it was a mistake, all that runnin’… I wasted so much.” Many, like Sam, are sorry they didn’t plan ahead. Larry explains, “I know we’d all be a lot better off if we had put some money away, that’s for sure. We could’ve lived on less, but we didn’t. Now we’re payin’ for it.”

Several people share feeling as if they are now “paying for” their days of extravagant spending. A number of workers say that they now realize just what a serious mistake their days of “running” were. “Work hard, play hard,” says Mike, “Yeah, we all did it, and now we’re
pretty screwed because of it.” Karen agrees, noting, “The thing of it is, we should’ve been smarter. We thought it would never end, so we didn’t prepare for shit. And now look at us. I can’t lie, it’s partly our own fault.” Karen’s self-blame is a common theme in workers’ remarks on the challenges of living on unemployment. Admitting that their failure to plan ahead has made things much, much harder, several people agree with Mike’s assertion that “If we could do it over again, we’d do it different, that’s for sure. That’s one thing we’ve learned from all this. Runnin’ will catch up with you eventually, and when it does—boy, it ain’t fun.”

Though they regret their earlier spending, in truth, these RV workers are not very different from the typical worker—most Americans simply don’t save much money (Gruber 2001; Bucks et. al 2009). Rather than setting them apart from others, working hard during “good times” and spending their earnings on homes, cars, and consumer goods—the “running” that many now regret—actually makes Elkhart’s RV workers more like other working Americans than not: It is not at all uncommon for workers to spend what they make in order to live the middle-class lifestyle they believe they have earned (Halle 1984; 1991). Theresa explains this common logic, noting, “We all felt like we deserved to do whatever we want with our paychecks because we worked hard and we earned the car and all the dinners out...” In this behavior Theresa and others were no different than many working people.

With the economic crisis and the onset of recession, the heady independence woven through reflections on their spending during “good times” morphed into individualistic blame and regret. Though ‘running’ wasn’t part of Constance’s world, she is well aware of how common it was and, moreover, she is highly critical of the consequences of the lifestyle lived by so many. She explains,

They all thought they could do whatever they want forever, you know. The big house and car, spending your whole paycheck every week. I remember my neighbors bragging about how much money they were bringing home and sayin’ that they were gonna take a vacation. And look at
them now. They got nothin.’ Can’t do nothin’, just gotta hope and pray somebody will feel sorry for them and give them work. Maybe it was fun then, but that’s what happens in the end—you run too close to the sun and you get burned.

It is important to note that “running” was so common during “good times” that it went without comment (indeed, some say it would have been odd not to have spent like their co-workers did at the time). Now, however, in the aftermath of the crisis, a number of workers castigate those who were ‘wasteful’ before the crash. Like Constance, others critical of the common practice of ‘running’ say that workers who overspent during good times have only themselves to blame for their current financial constraints. Sharon points out, “Things are hard for us, but at least we saved up some. We’re not gonna lose our house. We aren’t running around begging for help. That’s what happens when you don’t plan ahead.” In Elkhart, then, as in other times and contexts (Dudley 2000) normal—even common—patterns of spending, investment and consumption are reframed as irresponsible and immoral when economic conditions change.

Those who admit to having overspent during good times largely agree with their critics, explaining that their days of ‘running’ are the reason they feel so constrained and dependent now. Luke says,

I know we’re all partly to blame because we thought we could live however we want and now look at us. We thought spending and running was the way to be cool. Now we know you can’t do all that and prepare for worst-case scenarios at the same time. You know what’s really cool? Being able to provide for yourself without asking for help no matter what. I think we all learned a lesson that a nice car isn’t as important as paying rent without asking your family for money. It was a hard lesson for sure, and it’s kinda depressing to think about.

Others make similar comments, noting that the failure to save money and plan ahead was a failure of the independent ethos embodied by RV workers. According to Sam,

It was like, nobody’s going to tell me what to spend my money on because I worked damn hard for that paycheck, so I do what I want. We all did … But it left us not bein’ able to do anything now. Now we’re stuck and under the thumb of everyone else—unemployment office, people doin’ the hiring—because we didn’t plan ahead.

Sam and many of those who now regret “running” say that their failure to save money is particularly painful because it has resulted in their dependence on entities outside of their
control. “It felt good, sure,” says Howard, “I can go here, do what I want, buy what I want. But all that freedom made us all less free now, you know what I mean? Like we have to do whatever they say because we didn’t save up and take care of ourselves right.” A number of the workers I spoke with report that the unemployment experience has opened their eyes to how wrong it is to overspend. Ashamed of their days “running,” these workers emphasize the importance of saving money in order to be prepared for anything. In their self-blame as well as their desire to be prepared for financial disaster and able to provide for themselves without assistance, workers are expressing a variant on the theme of the overarching individualism so deeply embedded in their worldviews. The highly valued individual fulfillment pursued through ‘running’ and spending during good times has been replaced by self-blame, regret, and a strong desire to have the financial means to take care of themselves without any assistance.

**Emotional Strain: “Without work, who am I?”**

There’s no question that unemployment has taken a significant emotional toll on Elkhart’s RV workers: Each of those I spoke with asserted that unemployment has impacted far more than just their finances. Worker after worker reports that, once the shock of losing their job wore off and the reality of long-term unemployment set in, they struggled to hold on to their sense of identity. “It’s like I don’t even know what I’m good for anymore,” explains Dwayne. He continues, “I mean, I do know, but I feel like I’m not bein’ useful. Like I’m a drag.” Dwayne’s sentiments highlight a commonly expressed uncertainty shared by a number of workers who say they feel adrift. Many of those I spoke with note that, at first, the day-to-day reality of unemployment wasn’t so bad. “Well, in the beginning, it was kinda nice, to be honest. I had more time to do stuff around the house, more time with family,” says Kyle, who, after two years of unemployment, has occasional part-time work through an employment agency. He continues,
“But as time goes on, you start to get restless. You miss the routine, the feeling like you’re doing something.” Howard shares this longing for routine, noting, “It might sound dumb, but I miss getting up and going to work every day. To have something to do that you can count on. I kinda don’t know exactly what to do without going to work.”

Some say they are uncomfortable having so much time on their hands. Jody, who has recently returned to work after a year on unemployment, explains “One of the worst things is just not working, doing nothing, having nothing to do, having no money, sitting around watching TV and thinking about how bad things are.” A number of people share similar descriptions of their day-to-day experiences while unemployed, noting that, after the first few weeks of being out of work, they became bored and depressed. Ruth and Joe are a married couple who’ve worked in the RV industry for years. Unemployed for just under a year, Ruth started a new job in final finish at Woodland Lakes about six weeks before she spoke with me. Joe has been laid off for over a year and a half and is still looking for work. Discussing the emotional toll of unemployment, Ruth says “Boredom. That was the hardest thing for me.” “Same,” says Joe, continuing, “Boredom. Uh. what to do with myself…and it gets to a point where I should do a lot of things, but I don't give a shit about doin' nothin.’” Joe sighs, and Ruth breaks in, explaining,

It gets to the point when he didn't want to do nothing -- he was laid off before I was. And when I first got laid off, it was like, OK, I'm gonna relax for a week or two. But then I started feeling stir crazy … You know, there is a depression out there that's like that. He doesn't get dressed some days. Why should I get dressed, I'm not going nowhere. We watch TV all day…to me that's some sort of form of depression. First couple of months would have been fine, but it's over a year and a half months and we're still doing this. He's depressed. He was glad I went back to work, I was going stir crazy.

Nodding in agreement, Joe says, “Yeah, I know. I’m kinda jealous that she has somewhere to get up and be everyday.” Joe and the others who share similar feelings say that their work is an important part of who they are. Vincent explains, “I’m built for it. Other people, oh…I’ve got bad knees, I got…you know? I’m built for it. I’m a hard worker, man. And it drives
me nuts that I’m getting up at 10 o’clock in the morning. It’s like, who am I now?” All of the workers I spoke with agree that being out of work has been a significant challenge to their sense of self—approximately two thirds make comments similar to Joe and Vincent, noting that, without work to occupy and structure their days, they just feel don’t feel like themselves.

A smaller proportion of workers (11 of the 65 I spoke with) say that the fact that they aren’t able to provide the way they had in the past has been a significant source of turmoil for them. Married couple Justin, 33, (unemployed for a year and a half) and Jody, 28, (out of work for a year until starting a new RV job recently) find providing for their family to be a major struggle. Discussing the psychological challenge of feeling like one isn’t providing, Jody says,

To me, the most difficult thing to being laid off is, I have four children, and three of the four are three and under, so it's hard to be able to get them what they need and what they want. My oldest daughter, she's in third grade right now, and of course, she's hitting that spot where her friends want to do this, and her friends want to do that, and it's hard for us to do those things. We try to do what we can for her, and all of my other three girls, but it gets real frustrating, and real hard to be able to get to that stuff. We're getting other help as well. But it's kind of embarrassing, because I'm the type of person... I don't like to take handouts from people. I want to be able to earn my way through life. I want to be able to say, you know, “I got them this,” or “I did that.” I don't like to have somebody else just hand me stuff.

Listening and nodding, Jody’s husband Justin—also out of work—sighs in agreement, then says,

Same here. I've always worked for everything that I've got. It gets kind of embarrassing and frustrating sometimes, especially when we have to go to the store and buy things and we can’t get what we used to. I feel like a worse parent. It gets kind of embarrassing, especially when our kids... I don't want one of my daughter's friends to be like, “Can you do this? Go to the fair?” and I can’t give her money to go and they're putting her down, or anything like that. It's really hard.

Others express similar distress, noting they feel as if their identity as breadwinner had been significantly damaged. Sharing that he’s anxious about affording “back to school clothes for the kids,” Karen, a mother of three, says, “They used to get anything they want. Maybe I spoiled them. But this year, it’s nothing. It ain’t cheap and we just can’t do it. I’m not looking forward to it, I’ll be honest. It makes me feel like shit.” Jack, 43, is a married father of one who has been out of work for a year. He says, “It’s hard just not being the provider of the family.
Because I’m the male. And I know that sounds chauvinistic, but…just not being the provider for…you know… It’s depressing that I’m not providing like I used to.” Alan has been unemployed for about nine months while his wife has continued to work as a part-time nurse’s aid. He says, “The hardest thing about being unemployed has been listening to my wife say “I can’t do it all.” It makes you feel like the lowest thing in the world.”

Like Alan, several people say that unemployment taken a toll on their self-esteem. “The thing is, it hurts your self-esteem. Even though it’s not your fault you’re out of work, it’s still embarrassing,” says Josh, 20, a welder who’s been back at work for a month following a six-month layoff. Like Josh, Joanne feels “embarrassed” to be unemployed. She says, “For me, it just makes me feel bad I’m not working. I’ve worked my whole life. It’s like, without work, who am I? Some days, I feel like…I can take a nap and I’m like – I feel so guilty and ashamed! Like I’m lazy.” Making similar comments, a number of others note that although they try to stay busy and are hard at work trying to find a new job, they still sometimes feel lazy. Arthur says,

> After my checkbook, it’s been my sense of worth that’s taken the biggest hit. Because if you’re not working, you’re not bringing in the money, it’s like…what can I do? Who am I helping? I’m not helping myself, I’m not helping…It makes me feel like I’m being lazy, but what can I do? I try to help who I can and when I can, but it’s not the same. Yeah I would say its sense of self-worth.

Carl says that being unemployed makes him feel “like a bum.” He explains,

> Hell, you know…not gettin’ up an goin’ to work everyday. Especially when that’s all you know, you feel like a bum. Yeah that’s the biggest one right now. It’s like, hell I’ve spent about the last three or four nights dreaming about still working or gettin’ out and doin’ this or that, goin. Because feelin’ like a bum all the time makes you feel like shit.

While my conversations with RV workers made it abundantly clear that their experiences with unemployment had taken a significant toll on their identities, it is also evident that their unemployment experiences differ from others’ due to the widespread nature of economic suffering caused by recession. It is, generally, common for those who have lost their jobs to internalize the loss—to blame themselves by attributing their unemployed status to personal...
failings or individual worth (Newman 1989). This individualistic mode of adaptation was not, however, common in Elkhart. Indeed, a large proportion of RV workers say that they don’t feel much shame in being unemployed. “Well, I’m not embarrassed to be out of work,” says Joe, explaining, “…because we’re all in the same boat! It’s the whole town!” Rodney agrees with this sentiment: “The one good thing and bad thing” he says, “is that it’s all of us.” He continues, explaining,

On the one hand, if it was just me, it would show that there’s somethin’ wrong with me. I’m a bad worker or somethin’ so I’m glad that ain’t it. We’re all out of a job because of the economy. I’m a good worker and it ain’t my fault. Then again, on the other hand…if it was just me, it would be a hell of a lot easier to find a new job!

Sharing similar comments, several other workers note that they appreciate the fact that the problem is bigger than them—“It does make you feel less alone,” explains Helen, noting, “I can talk to my sister and she’s out of work, and so are my neighbors. So that’s nice.” Greg shares Helen’s appreciation of feeling less isolated. He says, “Well we’re all in this together. It’s not one person or one plant that has a problem. It’s the whole economy. That makes me feel better than if I was the only one I knew who was let go.”

Of course, as Rodney observes, the fact that unemployment is so widespread is both a blessing and a curse—while it may lessen feelings of isolation and failure, it also makes workers more pessimistic about the future. Several of the people I spoke with say that the huge population of unemployed RV workers makes the problem seem somewhat insurmountable. “I can’t believe it got like this,” says Nancy. She continues, “It just kept getting worse and worse, and now I don’t know. I just wonder how in the world everybody’s going to find a job again? I don’t see it, at least not any time soon. That’s for sure.” Although widespread unemployment tends to reduce the stigma and shame associated with job loss, it also tends to result in more pessimistic views of the future (Knabe and Ratzel 2011; Garz 2013). This pessimism is
undeniably present in Elkhart, as many workers say they are extremely uncertain and pessimistic about the future. “A few years ago, I thought things were gonna be great. But now, after being off and seeing what’s out there and what’s goin’ on, I worry about what’s gonna happen to us, for real,” says Nick. Several people share Nick’s uncertainty. Vincent says, “Every time I fill out an app, it’s like “What am I going to do with my life? What’s gonna happen to me? In two weeks, what’s gonna happen to me? Two years? What’s gonna happen to all of us?”

Each of the workers I spoke with note that they don’t think the economy will improve quickly, and a majority make comments similar to Lucy’s assertion that “Things are gonna get worse before they get better, and even then I doubt they’ll be that much better.” Dean explains,

Everything has gotten harder...everything is a challenge. Even getting up in the morning. Because you get up in the morning, everybody says think positively. But when you really think about it, when reality hits, positive thinking doesn’t really do nothing expect give you a false sense of hope. You know, they say there’s jobs out there but I don’t see it. And now that the unemployment stuff is gone, the few jobs that probably were out there, like the McDonald’s that are easier to get, they’re all gonna be full. I don’t think things are gonna get better.

A number of workers report that they don’t envision things improving much in the near future and say that remaining hopeful and positive is a major struggle. “It just seems like there’s no straightforward fix,” says Ryan, explaining, “I worry about what the future’s gonna be. Will things go back to how they were? How am I gonna make it? It’s tiring to worry all the time.”

Summing up the inherent difficulty of contemplating what he sees as an uncertain and bleak future, Zachary says “Um…not knowing what the next day would bring. It’s very depressing. I’ve been very depressed. Sometimes it makes you not want to get up.” For Zachary and for all of those I spoke with, unemployment is more than a dent in the pocketbook. The emotional toll of unemployment has had a significant impact on how workers see themselves and their futures.

Although the broader economic context has made their unemployed status less isolating and stigmatizing than would be the case if they were out of work in a low-unemployment context, workers still struggle with a sense of confused identity, the pain of being less able to
provide for family, and a bleak view of the future. Unfortunately, understanding of causes does not entirely negate consequences: Though these workers recognize that they are unemployed due to broader economic problems over which they have no control, this understanding does not relieve them of daily struggle of managing the financial and emotional fallout of being without work. The problem may be broad, but the lived reality is, according to many, very specific. “It’s not easy,” says Zachary. He concludes, “But it is what it is and you don’t have a choice, you have to keep trying to figure things out.”

Indeed, workers agree that they must, as Zachary says, “keep trying”—something that many agree is easier said than done. The long-term unemployed face significant challenges when looking for work and are often required to make difficult adjustments to integrate into the labor market (Jacobson, LaLonde and Sullivan 1993; Couch and Placzek 2010; Katz 2010). Although many I spoke with describe these challenges as particularly shocking, new, and somewhat difficult to accept, workers recognize that searching and applying for work is their only means of survival: To receive unemployment benefits, individuals are required to apply—or send resumes—to a minimum of three different employers each week and list the jobs they’ve applied to on a weekly unemployment voucher. Failure to do so will result in the loss of benefits. Because vouchers may be audited at any time, it is important that workers apply to three unique employers each week. If, upon being audited, it is discovered that they have listed an employer they did not actually apply to or that they have repeatedly applied for the same position, they may be charged with fraud and face fines and penalties. Expressing feelings shared by many, Richard says, “Everything’s different now. It’s like a whole new industry or something. They want all kinds of stuff from us just to do the job we been doin’ for twenty years. It’s pretty rough. Doesn’t make much sense if you ask me.” Expressing similar confusion and frustration, all of
those I spoke with—young and old alike—describe a bleak and competitive job market in which they are required to overcome multiple hurdles in merely seeking and applying for employment.

**NAVIGATING A BLEAK MARKET**

**Searching for Work: “It’s an employer’s market out there”**

“Filing for three jobs a week shouldn’t be hard, but it’s easier said than done,” says Burt. “Some weeks, there’s just nothin’ there.” Most workers share similar observations, and discussions of their job searches center on what several refer to as an “employer’s market”—a stark contrast environment to the ‘employee’s market’ so prominent just a few years prior. As the once-abundant manufacturing jobs disappeared, workers have found themselves engaged in vigorous competition for entry-level and low-paid positions. Though Elkhart has not deindustrialized, the closure of several RV companies has resulted in such a high unemployment rate that employers now have their choice of who to hire—a common element in a rapidly changing manufacturing-based community (Bell 1973; Metzgar 1980; Bluestone and Harrison 1988). Due to the economic shift, the same employers who had so recently competed to hire these workers now refuse to accept their applications. Rather than simply walking onto a production floor and agreeing to take a job, the hiring process has become a formalized and rigid web of requirements and third party agents (Davis, Faberman, and Haltiwanger 2012). In this ‘employer’s market,’ the job hunt is a disappointing and disempowering experience characterized by few jobs, competition, new employer expectations, and low wages.

The paucity of open positions is a major challenge. Explaining that they scour the paper and Internet daily, many say that they often struggle to find three jobs to apply to each week. Commenting on the challenge presented by the unemployment office’s requirement that they apply for three open jobs per week, several people say they often find it difficult, if not
impossible, to meet this requirement and note that they often do so by applying to low-paying jobs such as fast-food and service work—positions that never would have been have considered during better times. Andrew, 20, has been out of work for four months. He notes, “Yeah, I even got so desperate that I went to Wendy’s…and I said before that I’d never work fast food.”

“There’s just no jobs here,” says Zachary. Karen agrees, noting, “The jobs used to be so good, but now there’s zilch. We’re jobbed out.” According to Carl,

> Nobody’s taking applications. If they are, they’re not making it known. You know, like not putting it in the papers. There’s nothing there. Unemployment office, you can find a few things, but not enough. I’ve looked at the Internet, you know, I’ve looked everywhere, but it’s just like, where’s all the jobs? You want us to apply to three a week, but there’s nothing to apply to! It’s frustrating.

Theresa has run into the same problem, as she explains, “This week I’ve only been able to email one [application]. So, I mean, it’s getting slim out there – it really is. And in order to stay on your unemployment, you have to do it, and they just don’t realize how hard that is in this area.” Most share this frustration, reporting that finding jobs to apply to has become a major challenge. Describing his experience, Jeffrey says,

> Sometimes you have to call a whole lot of people just to get three or sometimes I will call for the first three places you know and I wait for an answer that they’re not hiring at this time…and if they say yeah they are hiring then I have to go over there and put an application in. I’ve pretty much run out of places here in Indiana, so I’m seeking in Michigan. And most of those places got a recording, says sorry we cannot come to the phone right now…we’re busy…that don’t count for unemployment.

In addition to searching newspaper want ads, scouring the Internet, cold calling potential employers and working with the local unemployment office, a number of people say that they have started driving from plant to plant, going in to the front office to ask if they’ll accept applications. Richard has “Searched all Elkhart down the road, goin’ in every single place along Country Road 19, trying to put in apps. Most places won’t even take ‘em.” Chad has run into similar problems, as he explains, “It’s boring, and it’s hard, you know. You just, fill your gas tank up and that’s all you do is just drive around, you just waste your gas, cause nobody’s got
anything, hardly anyone will take apps.” Several people note that the once common practice of filing applications with employers in anticipation of future job openings had been completely eliminated. According to Tiffany, “A lot of places just don’t even have applications anymore for you to fill out... They don’t even let you apply anymore, because they don’t want to deal with the paperwork. So what if a job comes open there? You don’t even have an application in, so you won’t get a call! It sucks!” Nearly all of the RV workers I spoke with point out that the process of looking for jobs to apply to is exhausting: “It’s a full time job to find a job,” says Stanley. “You wake up, do your searches, make your rounds. A lot of places don’t even have applications anymore for you to fill out. They just don’t have them. They don’t even let you. So you go home feeling beat down and just tired.”

A number of people point out that the dearth of open positions and historically high unemployment rate mean that they and thousands of others were vying for just a few jobs. Mark, 20, was unemployed for about six months before finding a job at FrontierWays three months ago. Reflecting on the job hunt experience, he explains, “There’s just so many more people filling out apps when you go to walk in. Sometimes you ain’t even got room to sit down, you have to fill it out standing up. We all want the same jobs.” Several others share similar observations, describing facing packed parking lots and long lines when out applying for work. According to Zachary, the flooded market can be discouraging and exhausting, leaving him less motivated to even apply for a job. He says,

Yeah, it makes it even harder to find a job when everybody you know is looking at the same place you’re going. I went to a job fair the other day for…I forget the name of the company, but they had between 500 and 600 people there and they only had positions for like 40 people. So I just showed up and looked around and I was like it ain’t even worth going here. I’m gonna spend 3 hours waiting to talk to somebody and you got 100 people in front of you.

While physical navigation of the overcrowded labor market was frustrating enough to warrant a mention by a large portion of job seekers, it may be considered a minor annoyance in relation to
the psychological consequences of the newly competitive quest for work. Those still looking for work say that doing so becomes more and more discouraging as the weeks of applying turn into months and years. These workers agree that the job search is depressing and worrying and note that the process has made them feel increasingly powerless and valueless in many ways—a common feeling among the long-term unemployed (Sharone 2007; Van Oort 2015).

Elkhart’s RV workers have never experienced such a bleak labor market. In less than two years, these individuals went from having their pick of any job to constituting an undistinguished and unemployed mass. The extremely high number of unemployed individuals has made the quest for work a fiercely competitive pursuit. “It’s an employer’s market out there,” says Nathan. “They got the pick of the litter. They can hire whoever they want, treat them however they way, pay them nothing. And so they’re only gonna hire certain people.” A number of others also call the labor situation in Elkhart an “employer’s market,” and all of the workers I spoke with describe a labor milieu in which applicants are truly at the mercy of those doing the hiring.

All of those interviewed—without exception—say that the competition for jobs produced by the crisis has resulted in a dramatic transfer of power from employees to employers. Sean says, “It seems like they’re in such a position of power now. It used to be where workers had a lot of power. We will work for you, we won’t work for you, you need us. And now it’s exactly the opposite.” Ken shares this perception, as he explains, “They got so many people to choose from. I’m up against 300 guys for the same job. We all got experience, we all know what we’re doing, so who gets the job?” Rather than being valuable assets that companies work to entice, RV workers are now viewed and treated by employers as relatively interchangeable and disposable. Ruth explains the situation, noting, “They don’t compete for us any more. To them, we’re a dime a dozen and so now we’re competing for them.”
One result of this competitive market has been a growing worry among older workers about their age. Of the 22 RV workers over the age of 50 that I spoke with, 18 say they believe their age has a significantly hindered their ability to find a job. Elton explains,

Well, besides all of us being off work for such a long period of time, now we’re all competing against each other. It’s pretty tough. You know…and like I said…you just heard my background. I got a big, long background. And I’m not afraid of doing any job. And working. But, now I’m at the age, I told you, 51…now I’m at the age where I gotta compete against the young guy. And it gets pretty tough, man.

Like Elton, other older workers fear that youth will trump experience in the hiring process. Abe, 56, has decades of RV experience, but worries that his age marks him as less valuable. He says, “I mean, I know how to build an RV from the ground up. I’ve done everything on the line. But it don’t matter to the ones doing the hiring. They want young people so they can work ‘em like a dog and pay ‘em nothing.” Though more common among older workers, the concern over age is by no means limited to this group—a number of workers in their 40’s and a few in their 30’s make similar comments, worrying that their age might be a disadvantage. Larry, 35, reports: “I’ve even heard of companies downright saying, no, we want 18 to 20 year olds…so we can try anything we want – we don’t want you in here telling us how to run our business.”

Greg, a 44 year old welder who’s been in the RV industry for more than 20 years says, “Even people my age—and I’m not even old—our age really works against us now, they want to hire young people because they can hire them really cheap and stuff like that.”

Ultimately, then, the vast majority of those over 50 and a number of younger workers say that age could be a significant barrier in such a competitive market. “It’s just bad out there,” says William a 36-year-old worker with 15 years of experience. He looks over at his father, Richard, who’s 59 and has been in the industry for 41 years, and notes, “It’s probably worse for him, no doubt. But it’s pretty bad for everybody, to be honest. When you got 300 guys wanting the same job, the math doesn’t work in your favor.” When talking about the slack labor market and
difficult competition, many people express dread and concern for the future. Dean worries that as workers’ benefits run out,

The 500 margin that everybody was saying that for every job that opened there’s about 500 that are going for that same job, now that’s probably going to go up to another 1000. Because. And it makes no sense. People are gonna be out there killing and murdering each other for, like, 20 bucks. Don’t make no sense—I mean, these jobs people are applying to aren’t even paying what they should, but we’re all competing for the same shitty jobs. It’s crazy.

Adding to the difficulty of navigating this bleak job market is the careful financial calculation that workers must do when they consider applying for a position. The state of Indiana stipulates that those on unemployment will lose benefits if they ‘refuse an offer of suitable work.’ After five weeks on unemployment, recipients must accept any job that is offered if it pays at least 90% of the wage earned at their previous position—this percentage falls to 80% after eight weeks on unemployment. If one refuses a job offer, they can lose their unemployment benefits. As such, workers say they carefully calculate what they’d make at each job before choosing to apply. Justin explains:

This one place, they would have started me out at 9 bucks an hour. And their top pay was 12 bucks. You’ll never get higher than that. And you know what? On unemployment, if you average it out? I’m making a little over 14 dollars an hour...that’s if you average it out. If you’re not...nobody is gonna have a job and go to another job and make less money. That’s just the way life is. Nobody. Baseball players not gonna sign for this team if he’s making 30 million more dollars somewhere else. That’s not gonna happen, that’s how I feel about it.

Justin is not alone in making such a decision, as a number of others share their own similar feelings. Many note that they can’t afford to choose a job that pays less than they make on unemployment. Fred explains, “OK, you’re used to making 30, 35,000 a year. And now, OK, well we will give you a job at 9 dollars an hour. OK, well it still wouldn’t pay the bills. Because right now, unemployment pays more than that.” Fred’s comment is an example of the careful thought that workers say they put into the decision of where to apply for work. “You do the math...” says Helen, continuing, “…when you’re out doing apps, you gotta do the math of what
they’ll give you versus what unemployment is.” Several workers report that “doing the math” limits their job search even further, as Don explains,

Well, first off, there are hardly any jobs to even apply for. Most of the ones out there are shitty ones—McDonald’s, Wal-Mart—that pay nothing. RV jobs pay more, but not that much more, so you have to figure out what you’d be making before you apply. Because if they offer you the job, you gotta take it or they kick you off unemployment. And then what if you take a job and you’re making less than you were on unemployment? You’re screwed. So it’s like, you’re applying for all shitty low-end jobs that you’d never take or the good-paying jobs that everybody’s going for.

As time goes on, this calculus changes. Unsurprisingly, those on unemployment longer express more willingness to apply to lower paying positions. With the end of their benefits looming in the near future, these individuals say they feel increasingly desperate. “I just applied to a job that pays 8 bucks an hour,” admits Randall, a married father of two teens. “I mean, I’m on my second extension, and my wife is on her first, and we got mouths to feed.” Arthur, who is also on his second federal extension of benefits, mentions that his stepdaughter recently took a job at Wal-Mart that pays approximately $600 every two weeks—the amount that he made weekly at his last RV job. He says, “So it’s hard for somebody like me that’s made that kind of money to spend that kind of time for that little money. It’s just…it’s just…it’s hard to rationalize. But you know what? At what point do you say, well, it’s better than nothing?” Most who, like Randall and Arthur, are on their second extension, note they are anxious about what their future holds and are increasingly willing to, as Tiffany says, “suck it up and apply for worse jobs.”

Elkhart’s bleak job market has been a significant challenge for unemployed RV workers. Like other manufacturing workers living through industry transformations and dramatic economic change, these individuals question their value, experience, and approaches to searching for work (Sharone 2007; Smith 2010; Khalifa 2012; Van Oort 2015). Unsurprisingly, older workers face the extra worry that they will be discriminated against in the labor market—a very real and legitimate concern, given that age tends to harm manufacturing workers’ job prospects.
in tight labor markets (Rodriguez and Zavodny 2003; Farber 2005; Maestas and Li 2006; Munnell et al. 2006; Heidkamp, Corre, and Van Horn 2010). In many ways, then, Elkhart’s RV workers are stuck between a rock and a hard place—their financial survival (unemployment benefits) requires that they continue applying for jobs on a weekly basis, yet they find it difficult to even find open positions to inquire after. Many note that job scarcity and intense competition make the job hunt even more confusing and discouraging than they expected. “It’s tough,” admits Tiffany. She explains, “It’s even harder than I could’ve imagined. I’m not even an old-timer and I’m having a hard time finding jobs to apply to. But I guess we got no choice but to do whatever they say and they know it, too.”

**Applying for Work: “Why do they gotta make you jump through all these hoops?”**

Tiffany’s evident exasperation with the difficulty of finding a job is not unique. Most of the workers who spoke with me—those who are still looking for work and those who have recently returned to the assembly line—agree that their job hunts have been difficult due to a number of new application and interview norms that they find baffling and frustrating. Not only are applicants now expected to submit a professional resume when applying for a job (a practice virtually unheard of in RV work), they’re expected to apply electronically. In addition, most say that employers are increasingly intrusive in what they expect from applicants: Job interviews now entail somewhat abstract questions and interrogations of applicants’ previous work history (a significant problem given the common practice of “job hopping” before the crisis) and potential employees are required to authorize a criminal background check and must successfully pass a drug test upon being hired (both quite rare practices during “good times”).

“We’re RV workers! We don’t have fucking resumes or business cards,” says a clearly frustrated Vincent, continuing, “I know I’m good at what I do, why do I need a card?” Like
Vincent, a number of RV workers express frustration and bewilderment at the expectation that they furnish potential employers with professional materials such as a resume. Just under half of those I spoke with say they are surprised by this requirement, and note that it was one that was simply unheard of in the RV industry. “I’ve been doing this 25 years and I never needed no resume to get a job. You just talk to the plant manager or you put in an app, and that’s that. Not anymore, I tell you. They want you to be like professional and send them your resume and stuff. Doesn’t make any sense,” explains Alan.

All who, like Alan, have been in the RV industry for over 20 years, share similar remarks and many say that they’ve before never submitted a resume when applying for work. While slightly less common among younger workers, several who have been in RV’s for anywhere from 7-20 years say they too are surprised and annoyed at having to submit a resume to potential employers. According to Luke, 27, “My sister works as a dental assistant. She has a resume. My uncle does security for companies. He has a resume. That’s ‘cause they’re more business-y. I’m not a business person, I’m an RV worker--why do I need a resume?” Luke and others explain that, in the past, they were simply expected to fill out applications listing their previous work experience and providing references. “No resume, or letterhead, or whatever,” snorts Greg, who has worked as a welder for 22 years. He continues, “you put in your app and they call you. Period.”

While most are largely bewildered by the expectation—“Why do they need a resume?” was a question voiced by many—some suspect that the resume requirement is little more than a tool that employers are using to their advantage. Jack believes that companies are now requiring resumes in order “to weed people out.” He says, “Because they know most people don’t even have a resume. So they’ll get less people applying and won’t have to deal with the hassle.”
According to Ray, “They’re just doin’ it to save money and time—so they don’t have to print out the apps and have someone take ‘em. You have to do it for them. You mail your resume and they just throw it away and hire who they want.” Making similar comments, several people say they view the resume requirement as a way of making the hiring process easier for manufacturers. A small handful of workers argue that it is what Rodney terms a “power move.” Sean feels similarly. He explains,

And companies...they want so much more out of their employees today. And, you know what, they have grounds to demand that. Because if you don’t give it to them, they’ll just go get somebody else. So with the whole resume thing, it’s just like them showing that they’re in control. They say jump and you say how hi, you know? Right. It seems like they’re in such a position of power now, you know, compared to what they used to be. It used to be where workers had a lot of power. We will work for you, we won’t work for you, you need us. And now it’s exactly the opposite. They say give us a resume, and we all figure out how to put one together and then mail them like ten copies or something. Because we need them more than they need us.

Whether angered, frustrated, or confused by this new work requirement, most reach a conclusion similar to Sean’s. “It doesn’t matter if I think it’s dumb,” admits Vincent. “I gotta do what they say if I want a job. I can adjust and do what needs to be done. Always have.”

When filling out applications, creating resumes, and interviewing for jobs, workers consistently run into another source of frustration and bewilderment—what many describe as a newly opaque process full of unknown and increasingly high expectations. Reporting that companies are now far less straightforward about the qualities they are looking for in potential employees, many say they feel like they are “guessing” when applying and interviewing for jobs. “I just don’t know anymore,” says Ralph, who’s worked in the RV industry for nearly three decades. He continues, “They’re real selective on people now, so who even knows what they want? They tell you what jobs they’re hiring for, but they don’t really tell you what they’re lookin’ for.”

Expressing appreciation of how simple applying to and interviewing for a job used to be, a number of people report that the hiring processes that have appeared since the onset of the
recession are not only confusing but are also unreasonable and unfair. Several workers note that manufacturers are now asking for more and more information from job applicants. In addition to submitting resumes and filling out lengthy applications, potential employees are now required to pass a drug test and to submit to a background check—both of which were relatively uncommon practices before the crisis. Karen says she feels overwhelmed by these extensive requirements, explaining,

When I applied, they needed a person for 3rd shift. So since there was an opening, I think, I put in my resume and I finally figured out the computer…that was a heck of a thing. Because it took me like an hour and 45 minutes to fill out an online application. I mean, even places you’ve worked at before have a 500 page application, drug test, background check, and you’re like, holy cats! This is for an RV job? What’s going on? Guess this is how it is now, so we’re just gonna all get used to it. It’s weird for sure, but we can do it.

Jeffrey had a similar experience when applying for the position he just started a few months before we spoke. He explains, “They make you take a piss test and do a background check now. You never had that before, but they all do it now. I think it’s to weed people out, ‘cause there’s a lot of people that won’t agree to it.” “Everybody’s whisk whizzing now!” exclaims Samantha, noting, “Before all this, almost nobody made you take a drug test before they brought you on. Now, though, every single place that brings you in for an interview makes you pee.” Indeed, according to most, drug testing has become a standard part of the hiring process at all RV manufacturers. While urinalysis is the most commonly used type of test, some say that they were asked to submit to a hair follicle test when interviewing for a position. Workers say that they believe employers are using drug testing as yet another means of shrinking the pool of applicants that they must deal with. Vincent explains, “Well, when you go to apply and there’s a sign that says ‘We Drug Test,’ lots of people won’t even apply. I shit you not, I’ve seen people walk out when they saw that sign.” Several people point out that passing these now-
standard drug tests will be a challenge for many RV workers. “Well, I know a bunch of people who smoke pot,” says Ruth. “It’s gonna be tough for them to pass unless they quit for a while.”

Some are frustrated by the new requirements. Explaining, “We’re RV workers, we know what we’re doin’ and they know what we’re doin’,” Howard wonders, “So why do they gotta make you jump through all these hoops? Fillin’ out long applications on the computer, peeing in a cup, a background check? It’s gonna hurt people who aren’t ready for it, I’ll tell you that.” Bob, a 55-year-old worker who’s been in the industry for over 30 years worries that the background check requirement is the reason his search for work over the past year has been unsuccessful. He says,

I hate to say it, but I have a record, a criminal record. Which… I never served time, I never went to jail for it, but now I have to put that on an application, and when an employer’s looking at this application that’s got something and this that doesn’t, he’s gonna jump on the one that doesn’t. Now I tend to consider myself a little bit above average as far as smarts, and I mean, I’ve done group leader positions, I’ve had people under me and that kind of thing…anyway, I’m not trying to boast. I feel I have a lot to offer for a company, but when they look at my resume and see the kind of work I’ve done at least for the last 15 years, it doesn’t matter, because of the record thing. I don’t know what I’m gonna do, I can’t escape it.

A number of workers note that background checks were never part of the hiring process in the RV industry until recently. Several people say that they have friends and family members with criminal records that have worked in the industry for years: “You know, small stuff, like weed or shit you did in your twenties—a DUI. I’ve worked alongside lots of guys with records. And I bet they’re gonna have a hell of a time gettin’ into any factory these days. And they’re good fuckin’ workers. It’s not fair, but what can you do?” says Jerry, who was not alone in his sense of outrage and disappointment at the new requirement. A few others assert that background checks are an unnecessary and unreasonable requirement. “Here again,” says Sean, “it’s the power thing. They have all the power and they can do whatever they want…background check, not calling you back, paying shit…because they know we need what they have.”
These new hiring requirements are particularly painful because they characterize a process that is markedly different from the way things were in the past. Mike explains, “I’m just used to, like, the old-fashioned way, where you got a reference, you get ahold of somebody and they’ll say you’re a good worker and they’ll take a chance on you. I mean, if you’re a good worker, things work out. That’s what I’ve always done.” According to Mike and a number of others, getting hired by an RV manufacturer has—until recently—been a relatively straightforward process in which one was hired on the basis of experience, skill, and strong references. Recalling, “In the old days, it was just, straight up,” Joe says, “It was like you go in and you say “I’m a good worker,” and they say, “OK, you’re hired.” Easy!” Shaking her head in disagreement, Joe’s wife Ruth, who’s been in the industry as long as he has, retorts “Oh it was not!” She continues, “You still had to apply and stuff—“ “—Nuh-uh!” interrupts Joe indignantly, exclaiming “I got my job at RiverRun by just walkin’ on the floor and talking to the manager!” Nodding, Ruth says,

Well, OK, but that wasn’t how it was for most people. But he’s right it was easier before. You put in an app and talk to them. They tell you what they’re lookin’ for, you tell them what you can do, and there you go. Simple. Not like it is these days, with emailing a resume and trying to guess what they want from you and say exactly the right thing

Describing similar experiences, others express confusion over what, exactly, companies want from potential hires. Lucy surmises that employers want workers who are “all quiet and mild” and Nathan believes that they prefer those who are “young, cheap, and dumb,” while Gary guesses that they’re “looking for educated people” and James insists that “experience still matters more than anything.” A variety of others make similar speculations and all broadly agree with Lucy’s assertion that “they can’t really say for sure exactly what will get you called in for an interview, let alone a job.”
Disheartened and frustrated by what they say is a confusing job market, workers repeatedly emphasize that the process of trying to find work has been dehumanizing. “You’re just one of a thousand, and nobody cares,” says Mike. Fred agrees, noting, “They don’t give a shit about you, ‘cause they know there are a million more people waitin’ in line.” The belief that potential employers “don’t care” is voiced again and again in workers’ descriptions of their job search. The majority of workers comment on the difficulty of this reaching a real person when applying for a job or checking on the status of one’s application. Detailing the labor involved in simply applying to a position, Alan says,

I did one last week. There was no address outside the building. I could tell it was the right place because you could get inside and see. But they had a picture frame sitting on the desk with a sheet behind it. And they had like three phones. If you’re here for this such and such, you know, dial this number. If you’re for this and that, you know, dial this. If you’re here to see human resources, dial 8112, you know? Nobody is at the desk, you pick up the phone, you get the recording about not available this time but if you leave your name and you know will get back with you. That was over a week ago. I told them what I was there for, you know, and asked may I at least have an application form possibly. But I am liable at this point… You wouldn’t even have the courtesy to get back to me, so I don’t know if I really want to work for you or not. I understand that it is a pain for them too because you are cut into their work time to have you know hundreds and thousands of people come around just for the same purpose, but still. We’re the ones who have it all on the line here and you can’t even give me a real person to talk to?

This lack of human contact is a source of disappointment and anger for many. Donna complains, “There’s no way to contact a Human Resources department to even talk to someone.” A number of others agree that finding a person to talk to is something of a herculean task. According to Richard, “Some places, they have someone standing at the door, you know? They won’t even let you in.” Most are extremely disconcerted by this radically different hiring environment. Charles explains, “Before, you just went in and talked to them. No more. Now, you can’t even get in the door and talk to a live person. They want you to do everything online. And then, they don’t even answer!” Karen agrees, explaining, “You do it on the computer and that’s the end of it. Nobody even looks you in the eyes as they’re taking your application or anything. It’s harder for me when there’s no human contact.”
Even more frustrating, according to some, is the fact that potential employers rarely acknowledge even receiving an application. Alan explains,

You apply to 20 different companies and you never even hear back from them. I guess maybe they’ll take maybe one person here or there. But it don’t take much to have an auto responder …if somebody submits an application, they should at least get something back to say that we received it. Because you know, they don’t even…I bet they only look at 10% of the applications. So… Well some of them have been…I was more than qualified for a job and I sent a resume and…I’d get on there again and get somebody’s contact name and I’d just send them an email and then I’d send them my resume and stuff again, but nothing. Just tell me you got it, you know, give me that respect.

Nearly all of the workers who spoke with me echo Alan’s sentiments, noting that it is somewhat rare for companies to even acknowledge they’d applied. Sean says, “I’ve applied everywhere and sent out resumes every week. All over the place. And nobody even responds to say they got it.” According to Arthur, “things are so tough, I’ve applied for a million jobs—even crappy 8,9, 10 dollar an hour jobs—and I don’t even get a reply. I get nothing.” A frustrated Barbara would even be satisfied with a generic automatic acknowledgement. She says, “It’s crazy, and like I said, a lot of times, they’d make you feel a lot better if it would automatically just kick back and say we received this and if we’re interested, we’ll try to get ahold of you or something, and if not…Very few of them even do that.” This lack of acknowledgement is particularly upsetting because applying to jobs is a crucial requirement for maintaining one’s unemployment benefits, as Alan explains, “You need to be sure they got your app because if unemployment calls and something happened and they say they didn’t get it…boom, there goes your benefits.”

The anxiety of successfully submitting an application is compounded by workers’ inability to check the status of the hiring process. Several people report that most places refuse to accept inquiries following up on the status of an application “I think that’s what was good back in the olden days when you put in an application… you could follow up with a call. Now there’s nobody to call,” says Donna. Annoyed by the impossibility of following up on their applications,
workers say they feel like they never know what’s happening. Charles explains, “You just want to know if you still have a chance at the job, if the position’s been filled. So you can cross it off your list. But you can’t find anybody to even ask. It’s like they don’t even care.” Several people say that this lack of transparency and communication is evidence of how little they are respected. “It’s just fuckin’ rude, is what it is,” says an outraged Vincent, asking, “How hard is it to say “we got your application” or “we’re not hiring right now”? I mean, come on!” This lack of respect is particularly upsetting to workers who compare the current environment with times past. “Before, they at least told you to your face what was going on,” says Joe. He continues “They treated you like a person. Now, you’re just a number.”

Even when workers are able to talk to potential employers—when called in to interview for a job—some say that, much like the application process, the interviewing process is somewhat confusing and disempowering. A number of those who’ve interviewed for work say that it seems as if manufacturers are no longer exclusively concerned with one’s work experience—something that becomes eminently clear when they are called in for an interview with a potential employer. Greg, 44, has “done every job there is” since entering the industry in the late 1980’s. Since losing his job over a year ago, he has “applied everywhere from here to Michigan” and has gone on a handful of interviews. Comparing his current job hunt with times past, he says,

> When things was good, you knew what was what. Floor managers would look at your app, call you in, you’d tell ‘em where you were at and what you could do, and you were all set. They wanted good, experienced, hard workers who knew what they were doing. That’s all they cared about. But now, who knows what they’re thinkin’? Do they want young kids? College experience? Certifications? They don’t say it in the ad, but then you go on the interview and they ask you about that stuff and what you want to do in the future or whatnot, and you’re thinkin’, “What are you guys lookin’ for? You know my what my experience is, so why’d you call me in if you’re lookin’ for something else?” Why don’t they just say what they want? It pisses me off.
Although Theresa, 51, has worked in the industry for 20 years, she finds the current hiring environment somewhat mystifying. Describing a recent interview for a position in final finish at Sundowner, she says,

    So I told them my experience and everything and normally that would pretty much be all they cared about. But then they asked me some weird questions, like if I was good with changes, what I care about, if I liked to travel, stuff like that. I answered, but the whole time, I’m thinking like, “Who cares? Why does that matter?” I never had an interview like that—it’s like, what’s the deal? I just went with it. And now I’ll know what to expect on other interviews, so I’ll be able to sell myself better.

    Several people who, like Theresa, have been interviewed for jobs they’ve applied to observe that, in addition to asking new and confusingly abstract questions, employers seem to be weaponizing their long work and varied histories—essentially turning what they considered an asset into a liability. “I’ve been doing this a long time,” says Nick, who’s been in the industry for 25 years. He continues,

    And I’ve worked a lot of different places over the years, doing a lot of different jobs. Which I thought was a good thing, because it shows that I can do anything. But I went to an interview last month, and they were asking me why I’ve worked for so many people. Like all suspicious. Like it’s a bad thing or something, like I’m a bad worker because I’ve been so many places.

    Nick suspects he didn’t get the position he interviewed for because of his previous work experience. He says, “I think it’s because they don’t want people who know what’s up, how they’re supposed to be treated and the way things are supposed to work.”

    This was not an isolated incident—twelve of the workers who spoke with me say they had a similar interview experience. Burt, who’s worked in RV’s for 21 years, describes running into this problem again and again. He says,

    But the thing that sucks about that is that now you go to apply for a job, and these people ask you about your job history, and you’re like, my job history looks bad…you know. I worked here, here, here, here…why did you work that many places? Because some of those places treat you like dog shit. And if they did, you could go to the next place. Well, still, they throw it in your face…oh, you worked this many jobs?
Others share similar stories of being intensely questioned about their work history—“The thing of it is,” says Carl, “they weren’t asking what you did. They were asking why. Why did you work at so many different places?” He continues, “I just wanted to shout, “We all did! Everyone went place to place! That’s just the way it was!”

Like Carl, many are stunned that what was once standard industry practice is now being framed as a sign of a poor work ethic. “It’s just like, what the hell?” says Karen. “If you didn’t work at a few places, that was weird, back in the day. And now they think it’s a bad thing? So what are you supposed to do? Lie?” Raising this dilemma—whether one should omit previous employers from their work history in order to appear more “loyal”—several people worry that their diverse work record was one of the reasons they weren’t even being called in for interviews. Elton says, “They want people who’ve only been at one or two places. So what do you do? I’m thinking of maybe just putting down what they expect to see.”

Others are, like Elton, tempted to obfuscate their work records. Jeffrey says, “You start dating yourself if you’re honest, and they say don’t ever try to date yourself…but it’s hard to do that…Because you want to prove that you have experience, but you don’t want to seem like you’ve worked all over the place, because they don’t like that.” His conclusion—“you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t”—is a sentiment shared by others who say they are frustrated because they believe their work histories are being used to disqualify them from obtaining new employment. Donna explains, “You could say that you stayed at a place longer than you did, but then they call and you’re screwed because you’re a liar.” This new obstacle—what Jeffrey terms “proving you’re loyal”—has made workers’ job search much harder. Greg says, “I’m having a real hard time…the thing I’m having a hard time with is working all those
years at different places and now it’s seen as a bad thing. We all did it. It doesn’t make sense to me. Doesn’t seem fair.”

The ‘employer’s market,’ characterized by few positions, extreme competition, high expectations, and opaque, inaccessible, and disrespectful employers, has left many feeling exhausted, confused, disheartened, and powerless. Many say that this reversal of power had taken a toll on their self-esteem. Noting that this was the first time they felt any type of competitive pressure in applying for an RV job, some workers say they increasingly feel somewhat valueless. “Now we’re all competing against each other, and it’s tough.” Elton explains, continuing, “It makes you feel like one of a million, your skills don’t matter, because the next guy has skills too.” The fierce competition for jobs has challenged Bob’s identity as a worker in some ways. He says:

For me, it just makes me feel bad I’m not working. Because I’ve never had a hard time…I could give somebody a phone call and get a job, my whole life. But now there’s about 5 or 6 people for every job that’s out there and so it feels like I’m not good enough, or they want something different, and I don’t get picked. And I’ve always been pleased with my work…my work ethic. And I still can’t get anybody to talk to me.

Most of the workers I spoke with—both those who’d returned to work and those still looking—share similar feelings, explaining that the fierce competition is, as Helen puts it, “…really hard on you.” She reflects, “It really makes you go down, feel like nothing’s ever gonna be the same.” Joe says, “Times have changed for sure,” and explains, “We used to be on top, and we fell. Hard.” Joe and others speculate that employers have established the various hurdles they describe as a means of filtering through thousands of applicants and exerting control over workers. “Nobody was doing this shit back when they were begging for help,” explains Vincent. He continues, “Now they own the world. They say jump and you jump.”

Although submitting resumes, online applications, background checks, drug testing, and in-depth interviews may be new practices in the local RV industry, they have been used in other
industries for years (Normand, Salyard, and Mahoney 1990; Garland 2001; Cascio 2003; Bushway 2004; Jansen, Jansen, and Spink 2005; Holzer, Raphael, and Stoil 2007; Wozniak 2015). Of the new requirements, most workers are somewhat annoyed and baffled by the need to submit a resume, and say that though they considered it a burden, it is not an entirely unreasonable request. Although drug testing and background checks are by far the most invasive of the new requirements and can result in the starkest civil rights violations and social inequalities (Garland 2001; Pager 2003; Pager and Quillian 2005), relatively workers claim to be seriously troubled by these practices. Most are, rather, simply annoyed that they have to submit to such intense scrutiny rather than genuinely upset by the checks. A large number of people speculate that employers use the resume, background check, and drug test requirements to filter through thousands of applicants. While they find these practices annoying, few find them deeply upsetting. “I guess I can’t say I blame them in some ways,” says Josh. He continues, “I know that if I owned a plant, I’d sure as hell need to figure out a way to deal with all these people applying for just one job. I think that’s what they’re doing with all this.”

Of the many new norms they identify in in their discussions of searching, applying, and interviewing for jobs, workers are most outraged and upset the impersonality of the process. In their comments on the impossibility of reaching a hiring manager or applying for work in person, a number of people explain that they “do better” when they can talk to somebody. Upset by what Sharone (2013) calls the “paperization” of the application process (154), they feel that applying remotely leaves them at a disadvantage. According to Joe, it’s important to talk to a potential employer because doing so leaves a lasting impression. He says, “When they can see you, that’s when you have a better chance. You can talk to the line manager and he can look at you and tell you’re a good worker and steady. They can’t tell all that through an application you email in.”
Fred feels similarly, as he explains: “You gotta see ‘em in person if you want to show them you’re a good worker.” According to Richard, employers can tell the quality of a worker through a simple interaction. He says, “They can tell just by shakin’ your hand, I mean it! When I was over at Plymouth, I hired a lot of guys. They’d come in and we’d talk and I could tell if they good or not. I never regretted doin’ it that way.” While Lucy doesn’t go so far as to say a handshake can create a good impression, she agrees that interpersonal interaction is an essential part of the hiring process. She notes,

I did up my resume and it doesn’t look all that great. I worked a lot of places and they don’t like that now, so... It’s like that saying that you’re better in person. That’s me. If they look at my resume, they won’t call. But if they could talk to me, they could tell I know what I’m doing. That’s why it makes me so mad that you can’t find anyone to talk to. Makes it tougher to show them what you can do and why they should take you.

The impersonality of the formal resume and online application process is upsetting to Lucy and many of the others I spoke with because they believe that impressions are best made in person. New to the concept of a resume and unaccustomed to applying for a job remotely, most say that they rely on interpersonal interactions to demonstrate that they are reliable, hard workers—an understanding that they say simply cannot be made in any other way but in person. These workers are playing “the diligence game” (Sharone 2013): Aware that employers in manufacturing tend to prioritize dependability, level-headedness, and a good work ethic, these workers seek interpersonal interaction as the best means of conveying that they are “…eager, compliant, and hard worker[s]” (Sharone 2013:143).

This diligence game stands in marked contrast to the job seeking process common during “good times.” Interpersonal interactions were at the heart of the “job hopping” that occurred during the RV boom. In those days, formal applications and resumes were far less effective (and, according to most, extremely uncommon) than a chat with a line supervisor. In this “employee’s market,” however, RV workers were not playing the diligence game because they were in a
position of power and didn’t need to impress potential employers with their work ethic. In fact, because many manufacturers were desperate for help, many say that when they were “job hopping,” they were largely unconcerned with coming off as a “good worker.” Howard explains, “Back then, it was us interviewin’ them. And they had to convince us why we should work for them.” Those who didn’t engage in “job hopping” report similar experiences, noting that, during “good times,” they rarely felt nervous when applying for a job.

The power shift that characterizes the current “employer’s market,” has left Howard and others scrambling for footing in a different environment in which they and thousands of others are competing for work. It is this imbalance that makes workers so uncomfortable with the impersonality of the current application process. Accustomed to being in control when inquiring about a new job, they are seeking to regain some measure of dignity through interpersonal contact—a quest that they are unable to fulfill in the “employer’s market.” Denied the opportunity to speak to their potential employers when applying for a job, many feel disempowered and frustrated with the dramatically different world in which they now find themselves. For some, however, talking with potential employers did not, however, turn out to be the empowering experience applicants hoped it would be. Those who have had an opportunity to speak to an employer say that doing so didn’t diminish the power imbalance they now feel in this ‘employer’s market,’ and report feeling somewhat frustrated and upset by their interview experiences. Asserting that the interview process is now markedly different, workers descriptions of interviews indicate that Elkhart’s RV manufacturers are now using screening practices that have been in use in other industries for many years. While other professional fields long ago abandoned or updated/modified interview practices reliant on questions focused on human
capital and productive skills (Spence 1973; Ghiselli 1974; Stiglitz 1975) such practices were normative in the RV industry until recently.

Workers’ accounts of being asked somewhat abstract questions related to their values, hobbies, and feelings (things they see as largely irrelevant to RV production work) indicate that local manufacturers are now assessing applicants’ alternative, non-cognitive, and behavioral attitudes as a means of employment screening—a practice long used in other fields (Heckman and Rubinstein 2001; Heckman, Stixrud, and Urzua 2006; Dohmen et al. 2009; Lindqvist and Vestman 2011). A surprising and uncomfortable development for workers unaccustomed to being asked questions not directly related to their production experience and abilities, this screening practice has left many feeling confused and unhappy at their inability to play the ‘diligence game’ that they’ve always found to be an effective means of securing employment in the past.

Even more upsetting for those who engaged in ‘job-hopping’ during the RV boom is hiring managers’ new practice of interrogating one’s employment history. There is little doubt that most employers use employment history as a criterion when screening job candidates: As a host of researchers have pointed out, employers tend to stigmatize applicants who are unemployed—viewing them as less skilled, burdened with undesirable traits, and, essentially, “bad hires” (Oberholzer-Gee 2008; Ho, Shih, Walters, and Pittinsky 2011; Karren and Sherman, 2012; Blau, Petrucci, and McClendon, 2013; Kuhn 2015). As a result of this common ‘unemployment stigma,’ jobless applicants are less likely to receive a callback or job offer from a potential employer (Oberholzer-Gee 2008; Kroft, Lange, and Notowidigdo 2013; Eriksson and Rooth 2014). The high percentage of unemployed RV workers in Elkhart make the ‘unemployment stigma’ somewhat irrelevant—if employers are unwilling to hire those who had
been unemployed following the crisis, they would be hard pressed to hire anyone at all. It appears that hiring managers are instead stigmatizing those workers who have worked for multiple manufacturers over the course of their career. Several people report that their varied work histories are now seen as a negative and used against them in their quest for a job and a number say they are increasingly tempted to omit previous employers from their histories so as to avoid this ‘job-hopping stigma.’

Although few have examined this specific type of employment stigma (see Bills 1990), some popular business press accounts in recent years have identified that job-hopping may damage employability, as those who have held multiple positions in a short period of time are often considered bad team players, and untrustworthy (Levinson 2009; Suster 2010; Green 2013). Indeed, those I spoke with who say that their employment histories had been weaponized against them report feeling as if they were seen as disloyal or bad workers—the latter is particularly painful to these workers who, above all, pride themselves on being “good workers.”

The stigmatization of workers’ varied employment histories is a stark indicator of how thoroughly power has shifted in the post-meltdown RV industry. ‘Job-hopping’ was a practice only possible because workers were so highly sought after at the height of the RV boom. The employment entrepreneurialism that once gave workers a measure of individual power has been reframed as signaling poor character and a bad hire. In the end, then, these workers find themselves in a radically different labor market characterized by stringent new requirements, an impersonal application process, and upsetting new interview practices. Many share the understanding that, in this new world, they are workers at the mercy of an indifferent industry and that they have little choice but to, as Sean says, “do whatever’s expected of us.”
INCREASING EMPLOYABILITY

Sean’s observation resonates with a determination to survive that appears again and again in RV workers’ discussions of navigating the downturn. “One thing about us,” says Ken, “is that we know how to get by. We can make it through because we aren’t afraid of hard work.” Most of those I spoke to share similar comments, explaining that they and their fellow RV workers are, above all, hard working survivors. Readily admitting that they’re living through the most difficult economy they’ve ever witnessed and extremely vocal in their disapproval of the many changes and hardships that have surfaced since the meltdown, most believe that, no matter how bleak things are, they will ultimately do what needs to be done to get by. Elton explains, “We’re hard workers and we don’t complain and we don’t screw things up. We take what we’re given and do the best with it. That’s why we’ll make it.” Acknowledging that times are difficult and there have been many upsetting and often seemingly unfair developments, a number of others conclude that RV workers can and will continue to survive, no matter how bleak things get. Gary explains,

We all know what to do because we’re hard workers and we can take what we’re given. Now, am I saying it’s gonna be easy? No way. It’s hard. We know it’s hard, we’ve seen it. And there’s been a lot of bullshit that’s come down, it’s true. And there’ll probably be a lot more. But we are smart and we see through it and we do what we gotta do, you know? See, we take care of ourselves, so it’s like, yeah, I’ll shut up and do what I gotta do to get through this. I can do a resume. I can learn new things, I can even work a shitty if I have to. Because I will get through. There’s no other choice. That’s how it is here.

In similar remarks that reflect this understanding, a number of other workers who spoke with me say that they’ll do whatever they must to survive because there is no other choice. Underlying this determination to endure is a deep faith in workers’ ability and stoicism. Ruth says,

We can do lotsa things, always have. When things were boomin’ we worked hard and long and did all different jobs. Learned new stuff and we were always ready for change. We worked our asses off. We know how. Just cause it’s hard or we don’t necessarily like it doesn’t mean we can’t do it or we won’t do it.
Discussing her efforts to find work, Tiffany declares, “At this point, I’ll run around in circles and quack like a duck if that’s what it takes to get a job!” Though joking, her exclamation rings a desperation and growing willingness to do anything necessary to find work that is shared by many. In their discussions of surviving the bleak economy, workers emphasize their adaptability, independence, and determination to get by. Although they may not understand, like, or approve of everything that’s asked of them, they will do what they need to do to find a job. From developing resumes and interview skills to learning to “sell” themselves and retraining, workers have engaged in a variety of self-enterprise operations in order to better navigate a new world of work and employment.

**Professional Development: “Things are different now and we need to adjust”**

All of those I spoke with recognize that—whether they like it or not (and many, if not most, do not)—the local job market has changed significantly since the meltdown and that they must transform themselves to the demands of the market if they want to find and keep work. Sean says,

> I could see with my own eyes that I would need more qualification under my belt in order to make the income I need to keep my family comfortable. And it just became clear that the days of having a 50,000 dollar a year job without something that makes you stand out...like a degree, or special training, something...those days are long gone. It just doesn’t happen anymore.

Like Sean, others say that the days when one could walk onto an RV factory floor and get a high paying job on the spot are gone forever. In their comparisons of the pre-recessionary and contemporary RV job markets, workers note that simply being a “good worker” is no longer enough to ensure success in their industry.

After dropping out of high school when he was 16, Aaron got a job on the line at a local factory and has been in RV’s for the past 17 years—an experience that he believes wouldn’t be possible today. Noting, “You can’t do that anymore. It’s not gonna cut it. Those days are over,”
Aaron says, “It’s a different world, and we have to work hard to hang in there and do what we have to in order to keep up.” According to Donna, “We’re all good workers, we all have experience. That’s not enough anymore. Now you need college or certifications or something that makes them choose you over the next person.” A number of others explain that today’s worker is expected to be professional, educated, well trained, and to “sell themselves.” These are novel requirements in an industry where employers competed to attract workers for decades.

Although somewhat divided over these new expectations—most see them as ridiculous, unfair, and ineffective obstacles to employment, a small number see them as an opportunity for self-improvement—workers are united in their agreement that, like it or not, the world has changed and they had little choice but to change with it.

“You have to do something to stand out from all the rest. You have to sell yourself,” says Gary, a 45-year-old worker with 12 years of experience in the industry, noting that he took a class on how to do exactly that. In the last weeks before his employer, San Marco, closed its doors, advisors and staff from the Indiana Work One program came into the plant and offered the company’s 1300 soon-to-be-unemployed workers a series of workshops and classes on professional development. Pamela recalls, “They came in and had sessions with us. Every week you could go to a different workshop and they taught lots of different things.” Former San Marco employees attended a wide variety of sessions, including cover letter writing classes, resume workshops, mock interviews, and seminars on self-improvement.

Of the many workshops he attended, Gary’s favorite was one that taught workers how to sell themselves to potential employers. Describing the session, he says,

It was the best one because they told you what to do and what not to do. Stuff that seems pretty obvious, I guess, but in a different way. Other than dressing right on interviews and having good references, you have to sell yourself. Tell them why you’re the best one for the job. One thing they told us was to show them that we like to learn and are always looking to grow. That’s something I never would have thought of myself, to ask the person interviewing you about learning.
opportunities and if they offer any professional development. I think that’s a good tip because it shows them that you care about being the best.

This workshop made quite an impression on Gary’s former co-worker Joe, who was less than pleased with the advice shared during the session: “Selling yourself, what a bunch of bullshit,” says Joe, wondering, “What is there to say other than you know what you’re doing and have the experience to back it up? Sell yourself like you’re a fuckin’ car?” Susan also attended the workshop and found it somewhat bewildering. She explains, “I don’t know what to think about what they say you to do. Ask if they’ll give you a chance to take classes? What kind of professional development classes are there in RV’s? I don’t know about that. But, if that’s what we have to do, that’s what we have to do, I guess.”

Though they have different takes on that particular workshop, Gary, Joe, and Susan agree that the sessions they attended in their final days at San Marco were ultimately valuable. Joe notes that the trainings “opened my eyes to what I was gonna be facing—and they were right about some stuff. I realized that once I got out and started applying for jobs.” Several other former San Marco employees agree with Joe, noting that the workshops they’d attended had been useful and revealing. Dennis says, “It was the first time I thought about that stuff in a long time, since I never had to before. They warned us that things are different now, and we need to adjust. And they were right.”

The workshops and classes held at San Marco (offered on site by the state because the plant closure affected such a large number of people) are also conducted regularly at Indiana Work One facilities and the local public library. Training sessions are available, at no cost, to all unemployed workers interested in upgrading their skills to be more competitive on the job market. Discussing these classes, local librarian Marsha says,

"We’ve had a lot more call for...we do an introductory to Excel. An introductory to Word. An introductory to computers. And we are seeing a lot more interest in those kind of free classes that
we offer, and those are free. And I think there again, I know people come in and say, I need this Excel class because I want to apply for such and such a job. And I know that I’m going to need to have computer skills. I’m going to have to need to have Microsoft Word. I’m going to need to have Excel so that I can present myself better.

Just over three-quarters — 52 of the 65 workers I spoke with — have attended at least one professional development workshop. The most popular of the offerings is a session on resume writing — nearly all who utilized Work One training opportunities had gone to a resume class. The second best-attended session has been the workshop on identifying and “selling” ones hard and soft skills to potential employers. Other popular workshops include sessions focusing on the job search, interviewing strategies, and improving computer skills. In general, attendees say that the resume writing class was the best use of their time. Many share comments similar to Charles, who says, “The classes to get you informed about your resume, and all that, that was the best. I still got mine. It's been years since I did a resume, so it really helped me figure out what to do, how to show my experience and skills on my resume.”

Those who attended other professional development sessions were also impressed — if not a little confused — by what they learned. Justin, 33, says,

I went to one on how to make yourself stand out from the competition, how to sell yourself or whatever. They tell you to do a lot of stuff like think about your passions and stuff. I thought it was going to be about what to say when you call a place, but it was Oprah stuff kinda. At first I thought it was dumb, but I guess it’s important. I think we have to do this shit now, so it’s good to learn it.

Helen, who attended a resume workshop and an interviewing skills session, says that both were interesting and helpful. She notes,

The resume class really helped me figure out what a good resume should be, so that was good. In the other one, I learned about what they call ‘hard skills’ and ‘soft skills’ and how to talk about those things when you’re on an interview, how to show that you’re a good worker and a good employee — somebody they want to work with. I think that one was good for knowing what to say on interviews.

Lucy shares a similar experience, noting “The one I went to, it was supposed to be about job security and planning for retirement, but they didn’t tell you anything about actually getting a
better job. It was about how to think about if you need to go back to school or get into a new line of work.” Donna says her computer class turned out to be a valuable experience, explaining,

I did a class in Excel with the unemployment office. Just because the other class I took said that would be a good skill to put on your resume. So I did that, and they had a home study course that you could do on lots of different computer stuff. I know it’s not stuff I’ll ever really use on the line or whatever, but I’m glad I did it. It makes me more marketable because it shows I’m willing to learn and try new things, so it’s a good thing.

Anita, who describes herself as “computer illiterate” says, “I did take a couple of one hour classes at the Work One there about computers. I put it on my resume. I know I’m not gonna get a job in computers, so I was like, did I waste my time? I don’t think I did though. Because it shows that I can learn.” Chris, 27, was unemployed for eight months before being called back to his position as a painter. His months of out of work were shaped by the quest to become more employable, and he attended several workshops and classes. He explains, “Yeah, there’s all kinds of different classes they try to send you to. Some of them will help you out. I mean, like they’ll want you to go to classes on learning how to do resumes and stuff like that, which, OK. I can do that if I need to. Some of it, you know, helps out, but most of it just seems to be a waste of time.”

The worry over wasting time was the primary reason cited by those who chose not to attend any professional development workshops. Although all were aware of the availability of the free classes, just under a quarter chose not to attend. Many say they don’t think the sessions will help them find a job.” Others who have not attended any workshops share similar feelings, noting that their time would be better spent elsewhere. Ken explains, “It just seems like a lot of it’s taking away from time you could be out looking for a job.”

While some who attended professional development classes and workshops express a bit of skepticism about the substantive value of what they learned, none regret their participation. Anita says, “I know I won’t use the computer stuff, but I’m glad I went anyway. It wasn’t a
waste. Because it was nice to be out doing something for myself, showing that I’m not just sitting around watching TV all day.” Zachary agrees, noting, “Well, the resume class was helpful, so I’m glad I did that. And even though the other class was dumb, at least I did it. You know, when they ask you what you’re doing to find work, you have an answer.” A number of others agree with Zachary’s comments, noting that it felt good to be “doing something” to help their job search. Nathan explains, “I think it’s important to try new things, self improvement. It shows you are really trying hard to find a job. Better than people who just sit on their asses and get a check.” Others say that the classes were good for their self-esteem. Donna says her computer class “Was a positive experience because it showed me that I can learn other stuff.” Of his participation in an interview workshop, Greg says, “I didn’t learn any new skills or anything, but it was good to get out of the house and have something to do. My wife was glad I went. And it felt good. You have to keep doin’ stuff to learn or else you’re never gonna make it.”

Education: “You’re screwed without something”

In addition to an emphasis on professional development, recessionary discourse in Elkhart has focused on education and retraining. Because the RV industry was a place where an advanced degree was not a prerequisite for a good job, relatively few RV workers have more than a high school education (and many did not complete high school). Concerned by how this relative lack of education and training will affect workers’ ability to find employment in a post-crisis world, state and national leaders have pushed for programs to educate and retrain them to better fit into a changing economy. Local librarian Marsha says that this push has been very effective. In the more than twenty years she has worked with the educational and training programs held at the Elkhart Public Library, she’s never seen this much interest or participation. She says, ”We’ve had for a number of years a pre-GED program to get them ready to actually
take the test. There’s always been some participation, but nothing like what we’ve seen in the past year. The program is almost always completely booked now.” Echoing what many public figures and commentators have pointed out, Marsha says she believes this spike in interest reflects a widely shared recognition that the economy has permanently changed and that workers must also change. She explains,

I think people definitely realize that they have to have a way of selling themselves, and without some kind of a high school diploma, whether it’s their GED or a regular high school diploma, they’re really at the bottom of the list when you are out competing with people who have high school or college degrees. And even people who are educated are realizing that there’s a lot more competition out there than what there was. So some of the skills that have had need to be upgraded.

Of the seventeen workers I spoke with who had not completed high school, all commented on their lack of education at some point during our discussion. Ranging in age from 32 to 64, this group of is acutely aware that the RV industry had long been—but was no longer—a place where even high school dropouts could make enough money to support a family and say they feel significant pressure to return to school:“ You’re screwed without something. At least a GED,” explains Burt, a 47-year-old who dropped out of high school when he was 15. Theresa, 51, left high school after the 11th grade. She agrees with Burt’s assertion, noting, “They’ll throw out your app if they see you didn’t graduate high school.” Most say they are somewhat resistant to the idea of furthering their education because they feel they’re too old to do so. Abe explains, “I’m 56. I got grandkids in high school. I’m too old to do it.” “What, I’m supposed to do chemistry and recite the presidents? I’m 54!” exclaims a skeptical Fred. He continues, “A lot of us old school guys don’t have a high school diploma. But we’re damn good workers. They’re tellin’ us that’s not enough anymore.”

Two of the younger members of this group—Aaron, 33, and Chad, 35—were enrolled in a free GED prep course that had not begun by the time we spoke. Explaining his decision to take
the course, Chad says, “I got the time. I think it’ll help me get a job. At the very least, it won’t hurt. May as well give it a try.” Six others are considering pursuing their GED’s as a means of improving their marketability. “I’m thinking about getting my GED,” says Paula, a 38-year-old mother of two who’s been in the industry since leaving high school at the age of 16. She explains, “Feels like I have to do it if I ever wanna work again.” Burt, 47, says, “I’m thinkin’ about doin’ one of the classes at the library;“ explaining, “The folks at unemployment told me I’d be better off if I got my GED, and I think they’re probably right. Education looks good on your resume—better than nothing, that’s for sure!” Even those who are resistant to getting a GED share the understanding that today’s workers are now expected to at least have a high school education. Tony, 64, explains, “I’m thinkin’ some of us older guys with lots of experience might still be able to get by, but not the kids. That’s the way it is now, like it or not. You’re not gettin’ a job without being educated, period.”

State and national policymakers certainly agree with Tony’s conclusion that education is essential. In August 2008, the state of Indiana announced the creation of a $3 million grant dedicated to cover the costs of educating and retraining RV workers. The following month, the federal government awarded the state another $10.4 million to help extend the effort. These funds, administered by the Indiana Department of Workforce Development, are to be used to provide displaced RV workers with up to $6000 to cover the costs (tuition, transportation, computer skills development, career counseling, child care) associated with earning associate’s degree or certification in a high-demand occupation associated with retraining and education. Vice President of Public Policy for the Greater Elkhart Chamber of Commerce Kyle Hannon said the money would “help workers get trained for the next great thing they’re going to make in [the] region” (Smalls 2008). Announcing the new funding, Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels said the
state was committed to helping “Every single worker who is interested in using this opportunity to advance their education or learn a new skill to do so” (Odendahl 2008).

Although all of the workers I spoke with are aware of this available funding for education—what many call the “RV grant”—only about a third are interested in taking advantage of the opportunity. Of the sixty-five workers I interviewed, ten had used the program retrain in another field, and nine are considering doing so. In their explanations of why they are hesitant to take use the “RV grant,” most say that they have little interest in schooling, feel that pursuing a degree or certificate isn’t financially feasible, or are somewhat skeptical of the ultimate value of retraining in another field. “Sure, it’s a good idea,” says Joe. He continues, “But they act like this money’s gonna fix everything and everybody will get different jobs that pay more, and I don’t see it. Not here anyway.” Like Joe, most see retraining and education as far better in theory than in practice.

Some say that they have no intention of retraining because they simply have no desire to be in school. A number of older workers feel that they’re too old to return to school or enter a new field. Richard, 59, explains, “I’m too old for that. You can’t teach an old dog like me how to do a whole new job. I’m not gonna be working that many more years. It’s too late.” Ruth, 54, agrees, noting, “To change jobs now, at my age—it’s a lot to expect,” and Charles, 46, says “Old timers like me in college…doesn’t make no sense. We’re good at what we do and that’s why we’re in RV’s in the first place.” Others agree with the latter part of Charles’ comment, saying that they just don’t want to be in school. “I understand that the state will pay for you to go back to school,” says Carl, 43, “But you gotta do this, you gotta do that. This testing, that testing. You know. I’ve been out of school for how long? You know, to heck with this testing stuff. I ‘ain’t
gonna do that.” Howard concurs, explaining, “I don’t want to go to school. I want to work. If I was interested in school, I woulda gone to college.”

Explaining why she won’t use the “RV grant,” Tiffany, 20, says, “No. I don’t want to go back to school. It’s boring and I’d rather be working. I hated school, to tell you the truth. I’m sure as hell not gonna pay to go back.” Vincent, 38, has no desire to return to school and believes that most of his fellow RV workers feel similarly. He says,

You know what all those people did? All those people? They don’t want to go to school. That’s why they worked in the RV industry, man. We made good money, we didn’t need to go to school, right? Some people want to go to school and some people, you know…it’s not for everyone. You could get a good job out of high school, and what’s wrong with that? They’re tryin’ to make it impossible to get a decent job unless you spend the money to go to college. It’s bullshit.

Those who, like Vincent, are resistant to schooling say that they entered the RV industry because the work appealed to them. “We’re hard workers,” explains Charles, “not the kinda people who wanna to be in the office all day.” Many of these workers say they feel like they’re being pressured to retrain. According to Ruth, “At the unemployment office, they expect you to want to do something different. They tell you that you should. But I don’t want to.” Howard agrees that the unemployment office “pressures you to switch jobs,” and says, “It’s not right. It’s like they don’t care that you’ve put in 20 years and are good at your job. Nope, time to do something else. Forget everything and do computers instead.” Similarly frustrated by this pressure, Tiffany says, “They say go do some other training, change fields and be a nurse practitioner or something like that. That’s not helpful since I don’t want to go to school. So, it’s like, help me find a job I want.” For a small but vocal minority (fewer than 10% of those I spoke with) who are resistant to any form of schooling, the expectation that RV workers retrain for a different occupation was untenable and unfair.

A more common source of resistance to retraining is concern with the cost of education. Many say they don’t see the “RV grant” as a useful option because they don’t think they can
afford to retrain or further their education. Dwayne says, “Now, you know, the education part of it. Yeah, sure...I’m all for it. But I can’t afford to go to school. I gotta find a job to put food on the table. So, it’s like, OK...whether they pay for it or not, who’s gonna support my family while I’m tryin’ to do all this training?” In similar remarks several others say that as much as they might like the idea of going to school, they just don’t have the means to do so. “You know, I’m not saying I don't want to. I bet it would be good, actually. I just can’t afford it. I got bills to pay and rent to pay,” says Barbara. These workers say that the state’s offer of $6000 is insufficient. Andrew explains,

That’s all they gave us. Six. Here you go, $6,000 dollars, good luck. Well, my brother is in college and I can tell you, that ain’t enough money for tuition, books, childcare, and to pay your rent and bills. They just want to get you started and then once you’re in it, you’ll take out loans to cover the rest. I’m not gonna do that, I got enough debt.

Echoing Andrew’s comments, others worry that they won’t be able to afford to complete their training once they start. Jack says, “I looked into a few technical schools. For what they want in credit hours for an associate’s degree, for like a project manager …it’s like 90 credit hours for an associates. And I think the one school was 275 per credit hour. Six thousand dollars isn’t going to do it.” Ruth shares the story of a friend who took advantage of the grant in hopes of becoming a medical assistant, explaining

Judy took some classes, but she had to stop because she couldn’t afford it. She needed money too bad, she couldn’t wait until she got her certificate. So when she was offered a job through Man Power [a staffing agency] to work at Midwest, she jumped on it. It only pays ten, but that’s better than nothing.

Like Ruth, Alan says that his friends who took advantage of the opportunity to retrain quickly found out that doing so was easier said than done. He recalls,

I know some people who took the CDL course. You take the truck driving, they'll pay for you to do that. Two guys I know took the truck driving course, passed the thing, even had a job. But the problem was they wouldn't hire either of them because they both had a couple tickets, speeding tickets on their records. Which has got been on there for 2 years until it clears and they won't hire him, so it was a big waste of time. That’s some foolish money wasted. Now they’re maybe gonna have to pay it back.
As much as some like the idea of furthering their education, most believe that doing so is too costly to be a realistic possibility for them. According to these workers, finding a job has to be their top priority because unemployment benefits don’t last forever. Ken says, “Going to school for something different would be nice, but I’m on my second extension. I need money to pay my bills.” Many others share Ken’s focus, noting that the long, costly process of schooling isn’t an option for people who need to pay bills. Nick insists, “School just takes too long,” and Gary agrees, asserting, “I need a job now, not two years from now.” Grant money or no, for these individuals, retraining is a costly process—a luxury they can’t afford. “I want to better myself. I know I should. But I need to get a job and then maybe I can be able to do school. I can’t afford it now, see, I can’t really do it without a job,” says Jack. Articulating a sentiment voiced by worker after worker, he concludes, “I would really just like get back to work. That’s my focus.”

The most commonly cited reason that workers are uninterested in retraining is significant skepticism of the ultimate value of taking advantage of the “RV grant.” Although billed as pathway to a well-paid job in a high-demand occupation, the majority of those who spoke with me don’t believe that retraining will land them a new and better-paying career. “I don’t buy it,” says Aaron, noting, “Where are all these jobs, anyway? I don’t know what jobs are just sitting open waiting to be filled here in Elkhart.” Expressing similar doubt, many are, like Aaron, confused by the promises of high paying jobs waiting for skilled workers. Chad explains, “The RV industry is the only game in town. The jobs they’re talking about…you'd have to move over to Warsaw or out of state to get one. I don’t want to move. And I think that’s why a lot of us aren’t doing the RV grant. We can’t just up and move for a job.” Some say that the multiple great new “career opportunities” so loudly trumpeted by state officials and economic leaders just
Some doubt that the new fields they are being encouraged to train for are actually “in-demand” enough to furnish well-paid jobs for Elkhart’s thousands of unemployed RV workers. Susan notes, “My concern is that I know a lot of people going for the same programs and I’m like, well, it just seems to me that there is going to be a glut of people. There aren’t that many medical transcription jobs. So people will get the certificate and still be out of work.” This concern is not unfounded, according to Abe, who explains,

My nephew was in the service part of the RV industry also and he went back and he got a certificate in computer – it’s called a C and C…it’s a computer thing that cuts patterns and cuts different stuff. A pretty neat skill. So him and his wife both went for that, and she’s still unemployed and he’s working in a department store.

Noting that he’d considered getting his welding certification, Mike says he doubts doing so would pay off in the end. He explains,

Well I was gonna do it, but everybody went for welding. So why would I go for welding when everybody else went for welding? Because you know what’s gonna happen? Then all the welding jobs are gone. I got a friend who went to that welding school. He’s got a welding certificate. But…he’s only making 10 bucks an hour! Welders are supposed to make 15, 16, 20. Making ten bucks an hour. So, yeah, I mean, there’ll be jobs…but they’re not gonna pay any of us…it might even come to the point where people who go to school? Those jobs are gonna be minimally paid…just so they can get the money back. You know, the deficit back fixed or whatever. The debt that we’re in. I guarantee you they’re probably gonna do that. There’ll be people going to college to make 10 bucks an hour.

Like Susan and Mike, workers worry that they’d become certified or earn a degree only to find themselves still unable to find a job. “I thought about going to school to be a service technician,” says Bob, explaining, “Those jobs pay really well.” He continues, “But those jobs are few and far between in this area, so I’d be certified and unemployed.” In similar discussions, others say that although they thought about taking advantage of the funding, they were seriously doubtful that doing so would prove a good use of their time and energies.
Although the nine workers who are considering taking advantage of the “RV grant” share these concerns over schooling, cost, and outcomes, they also say that retraining might be their best chance for a better life. “I’m young enough now that I can do something else,” says Justin, 33, continuing, “I want a better job where I won’t go through this again.” A number of others also comment on their relative youth, noting that they aren’t too old to start something new. Josh, 20, says “Now’s the best time to do it—before I have a family.” Similarly, Sean, a 36 year old married father of two children under the age of three explains, “If I’m going to start a new career, I figure it’s better to do it now, while my kids are babies,” and Ryan, 30, says “I’m gonna have kids some day and I don’t want them to have to be worried about money all the time.” While it’s true that those considering retraining for a new career are, for the most part, younger than those who have rejected the idea (6 of these 9 workers are under 40), the desire for a new career is not limited to younger workers: Donna, 53, is considering retraining because she worries she’s “Getting too old to make it in the RV industry anymore anyway.” She explains, “Especially now with them workin’ people harder, I’m thinking this might be a good chance to do something different that’s not as hard on my body. Something less stressful.”

The desire for a less stressful, less worry-inducing career is something that all those considering retraining identify as the biggest motivation driving their thinking. “The good days of big money and takin’ any job you want—those days are over,” notes Arthur. He continues, “So I’m thinking about getting out now. Going back to school for something where I won’t be afraid of being laid off every few years.” Greg agrees that the “good days” in the RV industry are a thing of the past and is considering pursuing a career in landscaping and eventually starting his own business. He explains, “Because when you’re in control, you know what’s what. You’re not waiting to hear whether you’ve got a job or not. I like that. That’s what I want.” Citing a similar
desire for stability, Dean also notes that pay in the RV industry had been falling and would likely continue to do so. He’s considering returning to school to pursue a career in the medical field because, he says, “The pay is better and you can count on it.” He explains,

I want to make enough money to be comfortable, and I don’t think you can do that in RV’s anymore. Not since everything crashed. It’s not going to be like it was before—high pay, shorter days and all that. I don’t think it’ll come back. So now’s the time to get out while they’re offering the RV grant, which, I don’t think they’d be doing if they thought the industry was going to bounce back to what it was before. No, the money won’t be there. So I’m thinking it’s a good time to start in a new field where you can make decent money.

In similar remarks, several others say that the RV industry is no longer source of well-paid work and that they believe retraining might open doors to better-paying and more stable careers where layoffs aren’t an ever-present threat. “It feels like I gotta to do something, you know what I mean?” asks Justin. He explains, “Like if I just go and get a new job at a different place, this is all gonna happen again. But if I do something like get my CDL, I’ll have more of a chance. I want to do something.”

Justin is not alone in expressing the desire to act, to change his career and thereby change his fate: All of the others also considering using the “RV grant” share similar feelings, remarking that they hope that retraining would give them a measure of control in their lives. Donna, who’s considering training in accounting, says “I know it won’t be easy to go back to school and whatnot, but it’s not easy to wait around and hope for a call every day, either. At least if I’m working on getting my tax certification, I’ll be making the effort to make things different.” Ryan agrees, noting, “Checking the Internet for jobs and waiting for them to call you drives you crazy. And it feels like a waste of time. I’m starting to think that since I’m not making money working, I may as well do something that will make me better in the long run.” Like Ryan, those considering the “RV grant” say they’re open to the idea because, despite their worries about the cost, difficulty, and ultimate efficacy of retraining, they feel a strong need to take measures to
change their situations. Describing a conversation he’d had with his father-in-law about pursuing a certification as an electrician, Arthur says,

He said it’s dumb because there aren’t many jobs out there for it and once everyone starts doing what I wanna do … going to school for it … there won’t be any jobs and the pay will go way down. But what I said to him was, even if he’s right, at least I’m getting off my ass instead of just drawin’ a check like a lot of people… Even if I don’t get a job from it right away, least I’m learning something new…. That’s what I think. You can’t just sit around and cry about how bad things are if you’re not willing to improve and put in the effort.

Ten of the workers I spoke with had, by the time we talked, completed certification programs as part of the “RV grant.” Much like those still considering it, these individuals say their decision to retrain was born of a desire to secure better-paying, more secure work and to take control of their situation by working to improve themselves. Pamela trained in medical transcription because, as she explains, “It seemed like a good opportunity to learn a new field. I’m always looking for changes to improve and learn, and I do want a better job where I don’t have to worry about this happening again.” Ralph trained to become a certified pharmacy assistant. Explaining his decision to participate in the program, he says, “I found out about it through the unemployment office, through Work One. You know, I thought, well, if they’re gonna pay for me to learn some new skills, I might as well do it. I jumped right on that.” Like Pamela and Ralph, the others who used the “RV grant” to retrain say they did so because they saw it as a good opportunity to learn a skill that would take them into a better occupation. Luke, who trained as an insurance claims adjuster, says, “I thought it would help me find a job with more money and better benefits where I didn’t have to worry about being laid off all the time.”

Retraining wasn’t easy for these workers: Intimidated by the idea of returning to school, many say they struggled to keep up with the workload of classes. “I had homework!” exclaims Nathan, who, like Ralph, trained as a pharmacy assistant. He says, “First time in over 30 years that I had homework. And it wasn’t easy to find the time to do it, either.” Initially overwhelmed
computer skills required for medical transcription, Pamela admits, “I thought about quitting at first because I felt really lost with the computers. I thought it was too much for me.” She stuck with the program, however, because, as she explains, “I thought it would be worth it in the end.”

The retraining process was also—as those resistant to retraining fear—a significant financial struggle for these workers. In working for his advanced manufacturing certification, Rodney had to commute about an hour and a half each day. He says, “The gas wasn’t cheap. I spent a lot of my own money just to get to classes. That’s tough when you’re not makin’ anything.” Stanley also faced financial challenges in pursuing his welding certification, as he explains,

> I spent a lot of time looking for work down through WorkOne. And I had them pay for me a 210 dollar welding class. And I went through that, and when I graduated from it, I had to take the certificate down and show them, but that part was good. But they wouldn’t pay for the advanced class for me. So I had to pay for that. Let me tell you, too, it ain’t easy to pay for something like that when you’re makin’ nothing.

Noting that he was often tempted to quit his certification program, Luke says, “I would think that I ought to be out looking for a job rather than sitting in front of the computer. It felt like I was wasting time that could be put to use. Because, I mean, I was broke. It wasn’t easy to stick with it.” Overcoming various struggles to see their respective programs through to certification, Helen, Kyle, Brent, Pamela, Rodney, Ralph, Luke, Nathan, Stanley, and Zachary say that, at the time they completed their programs, they felt certain they were on the path to a new, well-paid and secure career. Though now certified in a variety of well-paid, in-demand fields, including medical transcription, insurance adjustment, welding, advanced manufacturing, and pharmacology, none have been able to put their new skills to use via paid employment.

Pamela is glad she learned medical transcription because, as she explains, it “kind of got me through the winter months. It really did help to have something to do,” she is disappointed that she hasn’t been able to put her skills to use. She says,
I think this is much worse…because there’s no jobs … there is just no jobs here. And after I finished my course in medical billing and coding, there was…first of the year, there was no openings even in the medical field. It was like, people had a job, and even though they maybe didn’t like it, they stuck with it, because they had a job. So I can’t find anything

Ralph, Kyle, and Nathan have had similar trouble finding work in their new field. Ralph explains, “Well, right now, there’s no pharmacy technician jobs open because that’s one of those service jobs that…if you have two techs and a pharmacist, that’s really all you need, even in a hospital. No jobs for that.” According to Nathan, “I haven’t heard of too many people that’s had a lot of luck finding a job. I think there was like 12 of us here in that was taking the pharmacy tech school and I don’t know of any of us that’s got a job yet. It’s too bad.” Rodney, Luke, Helen, and Zachary relate similar tales—trained for fields where there are simply no openings, all have found themselves newly skilled yet still unemployed. Of the retrained workers I spoke with, Kyle and Stanley were the only ones who’d found work. When Kyle’s unemployment benefits expired, he turned to a staffing agency, where he only gets occasional part-time work. He says, “I’m a welder now and I’m working less and making less money than I did before.” Discussing his new job, he says, “Well, the thing of it is, I’m not even welding. Went to school for it and nothin. There weren’t any welding jobs out there, so I’m working for a speaker manufacturer doing paintwork. Not what I trained for at all. It kinda stinks.”

Although these retrained workers have not been able to put their new skills to use, none regret taking part in the “RV grant” program. “No question,” says Kyle, “That I thought I’d have a new job by now. And yeah, it fuckin’ sucks that I don’t, I can’t lie. But I’m not sorry I did the program. Not at all. It was good for me.” Similarly, although Helen is upset she’s yet to find a job using her newly acquired medical transcription skills she is glad she received her certification. She explains, “It was good to do the course even if it isn’t paying off yet. Because it
shows that I’m trying to make things better and that I can learn new things.” Brent agrees, saying,

You can’t stop trying. That’s what people don’t understand. You can’t just sit back and wait for things to get better, you have to make things better as much as possible. Take classes, learn a new skill, apply for jobs, do something. Does that mean you’re gonna get a job right away and that everything will suddenly be great? Hell no! But it shows you’re a hard worker and you give a shit. That’s pretty important.

Explaining they’re glad they’d taken steps to improve their plight, several others who’d earned certifications through the “RV grants” say that doing so had been good for their self-esteem and depression. Comparing themselves to unemployed people who didn’t make similar efforts, a number of these workers say that retraining was evidence of their work ethic and ability to survive. Rodney explains, “Well no matter what, I put in the work to take care of myself. Instead of sittin’ around smoking pot and drawin’ a check, I did somethin’. What you’re doin’ on unemployment shows what you’re made of. I’m a hard worker and it shows.”

Ultimately, then, the state’s solution to the jobs crisis—a major push for education, retraining, professionalization, and upskilling—has been a mixed success. The emphasis on education and retraining has somewhat ineffective, as relatively few workers are willing to extend their education or retrain for another career. While a small number say they are what one described as “not the school type,” most of those I spoke with are open to the idea of furthering their education but are somewhat dubious that doing so would be worth their time. The majority of those who have declined to return to school or retrain are extremely skeptical that the promised returns of high paying, in-demand jobs will actually materialize (a reasonable skepticism, it seems, given the fact that none of those who have retrained have found jobs in their new fields). “I don’t care what they say. I mean, look around, there’s nothing!” exclaims Joe. He says,
They can tell us to go to school all they want, but it’s not gonna do any good. I wish it were that easy… Just go to school while the state pays for it, come out, and boom! Great job, lots of money, great benefits. That’d be nice! But it’s not gonna happen.

Aware that furthering their education or retraining in a new field would require significant financial and time investments, these workers say they simply have yet to see any evidence that such investments would pay off. On one hand, it is unfortunate that the push for education hasn’t found more purchase in Elkhart, as research shows that less-educated workers are more likely to remain unemployed for longer (Keys and Danzinger 2008). On the other hand, however, skepticism of the ultimate utility of education and retraining is well founded, as none of those who have retrained have found jobs in their new fields. Moreover, research has demonstrated that short-term retraining programs are rarely more beneficial than programs that focus on assisting with the job search (Dar and Gill 1998; Stanley, Katz, and Krueger 1998).

In contrast, the push for professional development and focus on upskilling (developing resumes, computer skills, etc.) has been far more successful: Most of the workers I spoke with took part in at least one professional development session and a large proportion attended several. Nearly all of those who spoke with me say that professionalism is now a part of working in the RV industry. Though surprised and confused by this development, workers have willingly modified themselves and their behaviors to conform with new norms—from creating resumes and improving interview skills to acquiring computer skills and learning to “sell” oneself, the majority of workers have taken steps to increase their value on the job market. The state’s focus on professional development makes sense, given that manufacturers increasingly emphasize upskilling and “soft” skills such as communication, teamwork, and self-knowledge (Murnane and Levy 1996; Becker 2002). In general, then, RV workers accept the reality that they must take significant steps to successfully navigate the bleak recessionary market and tend to view the effort as a necessary investment in the self. Indeed, in their descriptions of the professional
development classes they’ve taken—resume building, interviewing skills, self-marketing, etc.—many say that they appreciate that much of their training has been about, as Chris puts it, “making you a better person so they’ll want to hire you.”

**WORKING DURING BAD TIMES**

Apart from Charles, Dennis, and Lucy, who say that their resume training sessions were important to their success in having found work following their layoff, none of those who are working now say that their professional development or retraining experiences played any role in their securing employment. Most of these workers say that, in the end, their professional development classes proved to be largely irrelevant. Constance, newly trained to use a computer, has no use for such skills in her sewing position at Woodland Hills. Although Stanley is now a certified welder, he’s working in painting at a speaker manufacturer. A number of others share similar stories, explaining that their new skills and abilities are not being put to use at their new positions. In fact, according to most, their new employers are not aware that they have upskilled or retrained. Jody explains,

> Well, when I interviewed for where I’m at now, I was hopin’ they’d ask me if I could use a computer, since I took those classes for it and all. But nothin. It’s on my resume, but they didn’t say anything. And I’m sure as hell not using a computer on the floor. So I guess it didn’t mean too much, but oh well. Now I can use computers, so that’s good. I’m not sorry I did the classes.

Of the interview-prep session she attended, Shelley says, “I’m glad I did it because you never know when you might need something like that. But I didn’t even interview for the job I got now. They called me in and I just took the drug test and that was basically it.” All of the others now back at work make similar comments, explaining that even though they weren’t able to put their new skills and abilities to use, they didn’t regret having made the effort to learn new things. “It was good for me, no matter what,” explains Larry, continuing, “Even though I was called back and didn’t even need a resume I like that I know how to make one now. It’s good to
keep working and improving, even if you don’t have to…” Trailing off thoughtfully, he pauses, lets out a short laugh, and says, “Yeah, because the way things are now, who even knows if I’ll have this job next week? Better keep this resume ready to go.”

Larry’s reflection on the insecurity of his job is, by no means, a worry borne only by him. In their descriptions of returning to production work following a layoff, workers describe a world of work that bears almost no resemblance to pre-crisis RV industry. Those who have found an RV job report say they are working harder than ever for significantly less pay, are constantly worried about the security of their jobs, and feel devalued and powerless.

A Transformed World of Work: “The good days, they’re over”

The RV recovery has been a slow and intermittent process. By the time I spoke with workers in mid 2010, RV orders and sales, particularly for less-expensive models, had begun to rebound. The industry recovery has been similar to the broader U.S. economic recovery in that it has been slow, fragile, and has failed to add jobs quickly or steadily. Experts note that the conditions in today’s RV industry are markedly different from those common in previous periods of economic recovery: Rather than the rapidly rebounding sales and significant industry expansion which characterized the post-recession environments of the past, today’s industry faces sluggish, inconsistent sales growth and considerable consolidation and contraction. Noting that efforts to forecast the industry’s future have been hampered by the fragile nature of the recovery and the new centrality of volatile financial markets, analysts acknowledge that the RV industry is less stable and predictable than ever before. Unsurprisingly, then, instability and unpredictability have become prominent forces shaping RV workers’ daily lives and understandings.
Despite the ongoing economic recovery, the industry-wide unemployment rate—and the overall rate of unemployment in Elkhart County—remained quite high for several years. All of the workers who spoke with me had been laid off at some point during the downturn, and just over two thirds were still unemployed at the time we talked. Of the 21 workers that had secured employment, all but two had returned to the RV industry, including 4 who resumed working at the companies from which they had been laid off. Though returning to their previous employers, things were not the same as they’d been pre-crisis, as each worker reports that they’d had to agree to a pay and/or benefit cut upon returning to work. Of the remaining 15 workers, 5 found their new positions through a staffing agency.

Whether unemployed and looking for work or back on the job, every worker I spoke with said that today’s industry is substantially different from the one they have known for the entirety of their RV experience. Workers’ reflections on living and working in this new milieu—what Chad and several others call “a new world”—are suffused with unfamiliarity. William explains, “I mean it’s actually – it’s my life. It’s about the only thing I know. I’ve done it all my life. But things have changed so much that it feels like a different job. I just don’t know anymore…” Describing profound changes in their daily work, their compensation, and the way they are treated and valued by employers, those who have returned to work say that the features that characterized the industry’s past good times have disappeared. These changes are so profound, in fact, that most no longer feel that the RV industry is a source of “good jobs.” Continuing his reflection on the changing industry, William says, “Yeah, yes. Yeah, you know… the good times… the good days, they’re over.”

Those who are back to work and those who remain unemployed but have friends and family members who have returned to working on the line say that RV work is harder than ever.
Acknowledging that, of course, this work was never easy, these workers say that new pressures and expectations have made their days on the job much more difficult. Some believe that work has gotten harder because employers are so reluctant to hire workers. Most of those who have returned to work say that they are working in plants with minimal staff. Industry layoffs have resulted in departments and factories running with a fraction of the employees they once had. Describing his return to work, Mike says, “I still have a few people. I had 18 people who reported to me, and now I’m down to 6.” Others report similar circumstances, stating that anywhere between several and up to a half of the people who worked at their plant were laid off and not replaced. Larry explains,

The ones that were laid off last time, they were key players. I mean, I’ve got, really, five departments, and I’ve got eight people. And at this time two years ago, I had 19 people, and I could really use 30 people at the height of orders, where we are now. So now I have to do the job I’m doing with eight people. And now they expect it, now it’s part of your job.

Larry’s experience is not uncommon. Many report that their employers are not filling jobs even as orders are increasing. Despite slowly returning to pre-crisis production, manufacturers are not returning to pre-crisis rates of employment. Instead, they have decided to keep labor costs low by requiring more from employees.

It is becoming clear to many that management refusal to hire more people means that they will continue to be required to carry heavier workloads. According to many, they’re now expected to do their own work and also that once done by other positions. Brian, like most, is aware of the logic behind this employment pattern, as he explains, “Well see, the thing is, it’s increased work. Because when they lay off 20% of the people, there’s 20% of the work to spread back around. So we do more work but cost them less.” Most workers report say they have been victims of this logic, as they find themselves working harder than ever to compensate for having fewer people. William explains, “I’ve been at FrontierWays and in my department, we’ve been
two guys down pretty much the last two months, but they won’t hire anyone else, so we do it.”

Constance, who works in a smaller plant that produces fewer vehicles than typical manufacturers, has had a similar experience. She says, “They don’t want to hire no more, if they can help it...So we will have to work a little faster and a little harder.” Many make comments echoing Constance’s, noting out that they are working harder than they had even in the busiest times in the past.

**Harder Work: “They’re riding us and riding us without end”**

Shelly, 36, found a job after almost two years of searching. In her 18 years of experience working in final finish, she’s never worked as hard as she’s working now. She says, “I’m doing two to two and a half times the job...” Most workers who are back on the production line agree that they are doing the job of several people. Since being laid off from a major RV manufacturer, Charles has worked at two other, smaller plants. The jobs he has had since his layoff have been extremely challenging, as he explains:

Now that the economy’s gotten bad, you’re gonna have a hard time getting a job back in the RV industry and they want you to do everything... Where I’m at now, I was the only electrician in the rough wire department. I was rough wiring 10 RV’s a day, by myself, with no help... And they would be yelling and screaming and cussing because I was behind, but I said, how can I keep up with everybody if it’s just me?

Others who have returned to production work have similar experiences. Vincent says that at his most recent job (where he worked for 3 months before he and several others were laid off),

They lied to me. They told me in my interview that they do three a day. I get there and they do seven ... They had me take a half inch drill, lay on the ground, get metal shavings in my face, falling in my face, with no face shield. I’m laying on the ground, half inch drill through steel...Well it started to affect my hand...I think I got carpal tunnel. I went to the supervisor and said hey man, my hand is messed up. He looked at me and he goes, “This ain’t no nail salon boy, it’s a trailer factory!

According to those who are back in the factories, such experiences are not exceptional. Sharon, who’s recently returned to working on the line, explains, “They’re riding us and riding us
without end. We are running almost as much as before the slowdown, but have about half the people.”

Workers say they are being required to complete increasingly difficult tasks on their own. Stanley has recently returned to work after a year and a half of unemployment. Though he was unable to find RV work and is now working for a speaker manufacturer, his two sons are both back to work in RV plants. He says, “It’s getting harder and harder. Companies are working them to death.” Lucy reports that after a year of unemployment, she found work at Midwest RV. She soon realized that the requirements of the job were nothing like anything she had ever experienced in her 25 years in the industry. She reports that she was working 72 hours a week, including “Saturdays...even Saturdays. And then by the time you rest up on Sunday, you gotta go back to work.” Karen’s boyfriend is also employed at Midwest, where the work is so intense that “he wore out a pair of shoes in a week, running so much. You don’t just stand there, you run...and they expect you to do that.” Arthur describes how difficult it has been for him to return to his previous job: “I did go back to work. I came in and they were running so hard and so fast that my body cramped up. I couldn’t hang with the production line, so I wasn’t able to do that job, so they switched me to something else. So that was a one day deal.” The requirement to do the job of several workers has made already-difficult RV work even more difficult.

Not only have manufacturers increased the amounts of work that each employee must do, they have also raised their expectations of work quality. According to many, a new emphasis on perfection has significantly impacted what they do on the job. Several people mention that work that would have been satisfactory in the past is now considered unacceptable. Mike worked in painting for several years at Hansom, which was pulled from the brink of bankruptcy when a larger RV manufacturing corporation purchased it. The merger preserved the factory,
management, RV brands and production methods. Hansom conducted a round of layoffs, but Mike was called back after being out of work for six months. Despite having the same job, he notes that quality requirements have skyrocketed even though staff has been dramatically reduced. He describes his experience:

Now, it had better be a superb job. It had better be perfect. If it ain’t perfect, you get your butt chewed, everyday. And you get your job threatened. It has to be perfect. Because right now, there’s so many other paint shops out there…. Whoever’s got the best quality for the cheapest price ends up getting their work, so we have to do better work with less people.

Others—from almost every part of the production line at various plants—say that they too have experienced a demand for flawless units. Several attribute this pressure to increased competition for the few dealers and consumers still able to afford the vehicles they’re making. The requirement of perfection is especially difficult to meet, according to some, because plants are understaffed and underequipped. Sharon says that because so many suppliers went out of business at the height of the crisis, workers routinely don’t have the parts necessary to build units. Describing this difficult situation, she says,

You’re being told basically, here’s something that you’ve never done before, you know, and it’s not really going to work and it’s not really what we should have, but make it work. And make sure that it’s perfect and you know, because we’ve gotta make these units perfect because we’ve gotta keep the dealers happy.

According to Sharon and others, RV workers are now expected to make miracles happen— they are expected to use fewer workers to create better units in less time. Lucy describes this new work environment, noting

When things started to pick up a bit and orders started to trickle in a little bit more… it was almost like a panic. Like they would, like, just freak out, you know. Let’s say you have a stack of 20 orders and maybe you’ve got a 3-week window to complete all 20…No, they want them perfect and they want them now. Which is completely – it was physically and, in every which way, it was completely impossible to do such a thing.

A number of the people who have returned to working on the line report that higher expectations have made the work environment more stressful and have increased the difficulty of the work they do.
Workers now find themselves working both harder and longer to replace a reduced staff and reach higher quality goals. Several people note that their employers are choosing to require overtime instead of hiring back workers. Helen describes this practice at one local manufacturer, explaining, “I know a lot of people from Chariot, right down the road from me. Instead of hiring, they’re all working overtime. Yeah, and you would think they would add a few people, but they’re not. It’s cheaper to pay overtime than to hire people.” Those in a piece rate shop do not reap many financial rewards from overtime work, so clocking more hours is actually a disadvantage to them. Employers are aware that having fewer employees and making them work overtime is a cost-effective way to suppress labor costs. Larry says that, since the recession, longer workdays have been undermining piece rate work. He explains,

If you have a group of guys that’s consistently gettin’ done at say 12:30, 1:00... they’re too good and management says you need to cut a man. You don’t have enough work. If they don’t have enough work to keep them here for eight hours, they have too many people. So now we have to try to figure out how to manage to keep our guys there eight hours. Even in a piece rate shop.

This mandated overtime (or even, in piece rate facilities, mandated full time) means that a substantial number of workers feel that they are coming out behind in the final calculation. According to Dean, “Yeah, people are working more overtime... they try to brainwash you into thinking that the more overtime you put the more money you make. That’s not really true. You’re just killing yourself...they get richer and you get just a small little portion.” Though aware that these longer hours do not work to their advantage, those who’ve returned to work say that complaining would mean that they could potentially be working no hours. Mike explains, “Oh, absolutely it’s unfair, but, you know, what can you do? You know, if you say something, then you’re in the same boat as the guys that don’t have a job, so...”
Lower Pay: “It’s like a different world, like a dream or something. A nightmare”

Another marked change in the world of RV production work has been significantly reduced pay. In times past, workers tolerated difficult RV work because it offered high financial incentives. Since the industry decline, however, this tradeoff has become far less appealing, as work is harder and wages are depressed. All of the workers I spoke with—those who had returned to work and those still looking for a job—mentioned that pay was “way, way down” as Rodney puts it. “They’re not paying nothing, that’s the problem,” says Joanne, concluding, “There’s no money out there.” Harold says that he’s “noticed the pay scale going down … They’re some jobs that used to pay like 15 an hour that are now paying 9. The pay scale has definitely went down. You can get on the Internet and see what they’re wanting for some.” The drop in pay has been something of a shock to many workers. According to Paula, “The pay is so bad. They’re paying nothing! I know how much these jobs should be paying, and they’re nothing close to that now. It’s like a different world, like a dream or something. A nightmare.”

Some of the older workers who’ve been in the industry for several decades say they are particularly upset because they feel that their experience has been completely devalued. “They aren’t giving us, the people who know what we’re doing, what we deserve,” says Nathan, who’s been in RV work for 22 years. Greg makes similar comments, noting, “Those ads in the paper, oh we’ll start you at 7.50 an hour. I have 25 years experience. You know, experience, that don’t matter no more. They won’t pay what they should and they’re getting away with it.” Because there are so many workers competing for few openings, employers have no fear that lower salaries will result in unfilled positions. Noting that he’s very discouraged by this devaluing of experience and that it makes his search for work even more upsetting, Nick says, “You don’t even want to go put an application in, because it’s like, so why would you hire somebody that’s
48 years old with 25 years experience when you can get somebody that’s 20 and train them your way and just pay them 7 bucks an hour?”

According to some, employment agencies have had a major hand in this devaluation and the depression of wages. Carl says, “You got the temp services now that are helping screw it all up too. You can go down and pick up a job, but now it’s a service and you’re working for them, so they’re only gonna pay you 9 bucks an hour where they’re getting 11 bucks an hour for you.”

Kyle, who, after nearly two years on unemployment, has recently been getting occasional part-time work through a staffing agency, says, “The services are a big part of the problem. I hate them. They take 10% of what you make. And you have to go through them for anything that you go for a job for. It’s terrible.” Like Kyle and Carl, many feel that employment agencies are exploitative and, as Ryan says, “a big fucking hassle.” Some say that these agencies make it easier for employers to pay very little. Joe explains, “They go in to a place and basically say, ‘we’ll get you all the work you need and you only have to pay them, like 9 bucks an hour.’ And then they make money off the contract, and the business makes money by paying people less.”

Older and younger workers alike point out that lower pay is simply part of the ‘employer’s market’—with thousands of workers to choose from, companies can, Patricia says, “pay as little as they choose.” According to Zachary,

> And there are a lot of people right now without jobs, so the ones that are out there, the people that have the jobs and want to give them to people, they’re not really wanting to pay anybody anything because they know they got 50 people that will do it for less. And people will take it.

Those who have returned to work say that such comments couldn’t be more accurate. In fact, all who are currently working in the industry, whether called back from layoff or in a new position, say that they have experienced a significant drop in income. These individuals are, according to Mike, “working harder for less pay.”
All of the workers who have taken new jobs report that they are working for less than they had at the position they held before being laid off. Laid off for about a year, Shelly, 36, started working at White Mountain RV about six months before we spoke. Though she doesn’t mind the work, she says, “It doesn’t really pay that good at all. I had to take it because my unemployment had run out and with Indiana’s new law that you have to go within a certain percentage of what you were making at your previous job, I got stuck with that.” Lucy, who recently started at Midwest RV after a year of searching for work says, “Right now, the wages are bad. They used to be a whole lot better. I work 72 hours a week and they give me a paycheck for 472 dollars. It’s just wrong.” Ruth, who has also taken a lower paying position, notes, “The job that I do right now, I make about 35,000 dollars a year. When I was doing that same job at a different company back before things got bad, I was making around 50. That’s almost twice as much! I had to accept what they were willing to pay just to have a job.”

Ruth’s conclusion—that she simply had to accept the pay she was offered—reflects a sentiment commonly shared by those who have found new positions as well individuals still with the same employer. Those who have been called back following a layoff report that they simply aren’t making as much as they were pre-layoff. Larry, 35, is a group leader at EverSport. Since returning to work following his layoff, he has seen his weekly pay drop significantly. He says, “I’m makin’ way less now that I was before….” He explains,

See, because now, there’s no pay for things you used to get paid for. Before I was out, I made excellent money. I mean, I cashed 1,000 a week, if not more, from doing extra work. And since we been back, they changed it. There is no more extras. There is no more makin’ extra money. The things that you used to get paid to do, you don’t get paid to do anymore.

Several others make similar remarks, explaining that, upon being called back, they’d agreed to wage cuts in one form or another. For some, like Nick, wages dropped because they were no longer paid a bonus. He reports, “Yeah, we used to get a bonus. We used to get a
quarterly bonus, which was every 3 months. And it was big, man, when you averaged it out to your paychecks, it was another two hundred on each check. But when they called us back, they told us there was no more bonus.” Others report that their wages fell as a result of the significant restructuring and consolidation that occurred while their plant was down. According to Mike, “Before, I was making $25 an hour. But then they shut us down and the parent company stepped in and changed it up. So when they called me back, they told me it was technically a different job, even though I’m doing the same stuff. Anyway, now I’m making $15 an hour.” Chris says that when he returned to his job in the paint shop at Python, he “took a major pay cut.” He explains, “But I mean, I had to get back to work, because we were sinking…I mean, what do…it’s horrible, but what do you do?”

Some are bringing home smaller paychecks because, upon returning to work, they’ve found that their plants are running fewer units or operating less consistently. Constance, who returned to her position as a sewer at Woodland Hills RV about two months before we spoke, says that her plant is not operating full time. She explains, “They feel it's more economical to completely shut the place down of Fridays. So I’m working less hours and bringing home less money.” Gerald, like Constance, is also working fewer hours since returning to his job. He says, “Well… they’ll work us for like two weeks for four days, and then lay us off for 2 weeks. So they finally called us back, but they’re not running as much, so it’s fewer days. Smaller paychecks. Better than nothing, I guess.”

Those who have returned to the job they held before their layoff have also experienced cuts in their benefits. When Mike was called back, he learned that he’d lost some of the benefits he’d accrued during his tenure at Hansom. He explains,

They don't have to give you back your seniority. And they had people off... laid off, if you're not call back within 30 days, you lose your seniority. Are we didn't get, even our vacation days. I was there eight years in September and I didn't get anything... Because I wasn't physically -- the
paperwork said you had to be physically working the week before July 4th., because that's when you get your money. Because of that paperwork, I couldn't get my money. I called. Nothing. When I started again and asked them, they said it was gone.

Larry had a similar experience, noting that in addition to losing his holiday pay, he’s also experienced an increase in the amount he must pay for health insurance. “When they first started cutting, they cut our vision and dental. Those are gone for good,” he explains. He continues, “Well now in a few weeks, they’re just getting rid of any insurance altogether, and having a people's plan where they offer an amount of choices, and you pick which one you want, and you pay for it. The thing of it is, all of them are more expensive than what we got now.” Chris has also seen his insurance costs rise since returning to work. He says,

I mean, that's what they're telling us at work. Our prices keep going up because we keep laying people off. So, we lose people in our group, then that raises the price, and their premium goes up annually. When I first started out there, it was 60 bucks a week for family. Now it’s 160 a week. They say that’s what they have to do because of the economy. So we have to pay more and they pay less.

Several of those I spoke with say that their employers have, like Chris’s, explained wage and benefits cuts as an unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of the economic slowdown. “My people said they had no choice,” recalls Mike, “They said the economy forced them to cut us back.” Though many of their employers had made such claims, none of the workers I spoke with believed the cuts were born of absolute economic necessity. When I asked if they thought manufacturers were only paying what they could afford, these workers responded with a universal and resounding “no.” “No way,” says Aaron. “They cut jobs because they had to, but if they’re hiring, it means they have orders. I know how much they make on a vehicle. They can afford it.” Ruth and Joe agree. Explaining, “For them it’s all about the money. They’re using this to…” Ruth trails off and Joe finishes her thought, saying “… To make a bunch of money off of cheap labor. That’s exactly what they’re doing.” He explains, “We’re old dogs. We been in this
too long. We know the profit margins, and they’re still makin’ profit, I guarantee it.” Indeed, according to Larry,

Everybody knows. It's not a secret. But when you still run 10 million dollars through the door, when we were running rentals and we were running 14 a day, we were still only producing between 9 and 12 million a week. And our paychecks were almost triple what they are now. So, the guys aren't dumb. I mean, they're not. Say there's three guys in a department and you lose two of them, you got one man left doing the whole damn department, four units a day versus ten units a day, somewhere the math don't add up to get a smaller paycheck.

Although Aaron, Larry, Ruth, Joe, and the others I spoke with readily acknowledge that the economic crash had all but gutted their industry, they simply don’t believe that manufacturers can’t afford to pay good wages. Chris says, “Yeah, I know it was bad and that’s why we went down so much. But the ones that are left are still selling units and still making big money. They can afford to pay us what we’re worth.” Rather than paying what they can afford, then, according to all of the workers I spoke with, employers are paying, as Sharon says, “what they can get away with.”

Although relieved to be working after what has, for many, been a long and exhausting search for employment, there’s no doubt that these workers are surprised and upset by the ways their industry has changed. Out of work a year before starting a new job a month before we spoke, Jody, 28, comments on the things that have and have not changed in the world of RV work. She says, “It’s really hard work, still. And it's still very hot and it’s very fast. Still not an easy job. So then, you know, you’re like, geez! You feel cheated because you know what you was making and what you’re bringing home now.” Several others, like Jody, say that they’re working just as hard—if not harder—than they had in the past, yet are making less money and feel less respected on the job. Shelley explains, “I’m bustin’ my ass, takin’ all kinds of shit, and I have less to show for it than I did before.” No matter how they feel about their falling pay and
disappearing benefits, however, all agree that registering their displeasure is simply not an option because, doing so would be, as Mark notes, “a surefire way to lose your job.”

Disempowerment: “You keep your mouth shut and do what you’re told”

Mark’s observation speaks to a new sense of insecurity and powerlessness that has reshaped the working lives of Elkhart’s RV workers. All who have returned to work since the meltdown (whether for their pre-layoff employer or for a new employer) note that employees are now viewed and treated as low-value interchangeable commodities. “They know that they can treat us any way they want and we won’t complain,” says Vincent. He continues, “They have all the power.” After losing his job when Lakeland RV shut down, Vincent searched for work for over a year before finding a job at Woodland Hills RV. Initially thrilled to finally be working again, he soon realized that the RV industry he thought he knew so well had changed dramatically. He says, “Pay us nothing, make us do all kinds of shit, it doesn’t matter. You never know what’s goin’ on. You got kids to feed? Not our problem!” Three months after starting at Woodland Hills RV, Vincent and the others who’d been hired around the same time he was were laid off with the manufacturer made another round of cutbacks. Though extremely angry that he was working harder for less pay, Vincent says he was most bothered by how insecure his job was. Reflecting on this more recent layoff, he says,

They really keep us in the dark as much as they possibly can. Um, you know, there’s telltale signs. When your paycheck goes down quite a bit, you know, there’s always a reason for that. And when you look at an order sheet for what we have to build…you know, you kinda see the warning signs... But that’s just guessing. Then all of a sudden they come and tell you that you’re out. That’s it. Fuck it, on to the next guy. Now, the way it is, nobody ever knows if they’re gonna have a job tomorrow or not. It drives you fuckin’ crazy.

Vincent’s feelings are not at all unique—every person I spoke with that had returned to work voice similar frustration with the uncertainty of this new reality.

“We’re all worried,” says Constance. “We’re all worried, all the time about whether we’re going to shutdown again. They don’t tell us what’s happenin,’ so we’re always wonderin’
if we’ll be working next month or not.” Others share similar feelings regarding the uncertainty of their jobs. Charles, an electrician with 20 years of industry experience, has just started a new job through a staffing agency—his second in just under a year. Reflecting on his recent experiences, he says,

At the one place, I figured I had a great future. I was supposed to be making in another month, I worked there, that’s what it was, 11 months. If they’d worked me there 12 months, then they’d have to hire me. I was in my 11th month before I got laid off. So that’s what it’s like now. You never know and you’re constantly scared to death whether or not you got a job. We’re all scared all the time and they don’t care. To tell you the truth, I think they want us to be scared for our jobs.

Many agree with Charles’ conclusion, noting they think employers manufacture insecurity as a means of ensuring workers do as they’re told. Nick, back to work at the job he held for four years before his three-month layoff, says, “They keep us in the dark on purpose. Because they know if we’re worried about having a job, we’ll do anything they say and we won’t say shit. Cut our bonuses and we won’t complain because we feel lucky to have a job. I think they do it to basically control us in a way.”

A number of others report feeling that they’re intentionally being made to worry for their jobs. Jody says that her bosses at Chariot RV “are always sayin’ how bad the economy is and how hard it is to keep the plant running.” She continues, “I think they’re tryin’ to scare us on purpose.” Ruth agrees that employers are purposefully worrying their workers. Noting that she was once laid off in the early 1980’s, Ruth recalls,

I mean...usually if there was gonna be a layoff, they would let people know, you know, give them a chance to prepare for it at least as much as they possibly could. We’d have a meeting to warn everyone as soon as possible. They did it because they didn’t want you to worry. Now, though, it’s like they want you to. They don’t warn you or tell you what’s goin’ on because they want you to be on your toes for them.

Mike says that he and his co-workers are constantly on edge, noting, “It’s gotten so we’re comin’ to expect to be laid off. Like we’re thinkin’ lay-offs are part of the job now because nobody tells us anything other than how bad things are.” William, back to work at FrontierWays, reports that
he and his fellow linemen are, as he says, “Being kept in the dark” by their managers, explaining, “The less they tell us about how it’s going, the more scared for our jobs we are, the harder we work.” He continues, “The thing of it is, though, is that it’s working. We’re all so worried about having a job that we’ll do anything to keep it.” Nearly all agree with William’s conclusion: Whether intentionally manufactured or not (most suspect it is), the incessantly insecurity that permeates their work is an effective means of keeping employees quiet and compliant.

The most dramatic change in the recessionary RV industry has been the disempowerment of workers. Those who are back at work say that all of the changes they’ve noticed—fewer people, harder work, higher standards, longer hours, less pay, more insecurity—are a result of the dramatic transfer of power from worker to employer. “Yeah the companies—well, the very few companies that are left, they dictate all the terms now,” notes Stanley. He continues, “They know that there are thousands of people still here that are out of work and if you don’t like what they’re selling, or if you complain or if you screw up, then they’ll just go for the next one.” Stanley’s comments reflect the commonly shared understanding individuals have almost no agency at all in the workplace. “They have the power. We have nothing and they decide what happens,” says Mike. He explains,

Because now that the bosses know now that people aren’t just gonna quit their job to go somewhere else, they’re gonna treat you like however they want to treat you. You know, they could do anything to you, they know, he ain’t gonna walk out of here. If he walks out, he won’t get a job.

Every person I spoke with made remarks similar to Mike’s. From Shelley’s revelation that “They pretty much tell everyone, 'Well, you gotta do it, 'cause you can't go nowhere else. Where else you gonna go? Who's gonna hire you?' We hear that shit all the time,” to Kyle’s note that “They’re making their money by takin’ advantage of all of us, and there’s really nothing we can do about it. We just kind of put up with it and shut up and go on with it”—all agree that, as
Dennis puts it, “if you want to get and keep a job, you keep your mouth shut and do what you’re told.”

This disempowerment is, according to most, the worst part of working in the post-meltdown world. Many say that they feel as if they have no control over their work, their lives, or their fates. Lucy says that the power imbalance makes her feel “pretty much worthless” when at work. For Jody, “It’s depressing…because your employer has got the power to decide if you’re gonna have a job or not, and if your family is going to eat or not, if you’re gonna have a home, you know.” According to Aaron, “it’s pretty hard to just shut up when you know that what they’re doing isn’t right. It’s the hardest part of my job, I’m serious. But we don’t have a choice.” Most say that although they are unhappy with what’s happening at work, they are so relieved to have a job that they’re largely unwilling to complain or quit. “It’s not good to let them get away with this, I know,” admits Sharon, continuing, “But I’m not gonna say anything. I have a baby and I’m lucky to be working at all.” Ruth agrees, explaining, “We all know what’s right and what’s not right. But we’re all scared for our jobs, so this is just how it has to be. I hate it. But I hate not working even more.”

Like Sharon, the others who are now working say that simply having a job is far more important to them than being happy with their job. “Well, see, if things were different, there’s no way I’d put up with this shit,” explains William. “But, as is,” he continues, “there’s no way I’m complainin.’ I want to work.” Dennis agrees with this sentiment, noting that he’d witnessed a co-worker lose his job after missing a day of work due to a minor car accident—“if they’ll fire you for something that’s not even your fault,” he says, “there’s no way in hell they’ll keep anyone who tries to get them to change things. I have kids, so I’m gonna shut up and do my work.”
Sharing the story of the one worker on his line at EverSport who did choose to protest their low pay, Larry says,

> We have a traveler that we send down the line on every unit. And the back sheet is called the shortage sheet, so if you run that unit, and you don’t have something—a part to put on it, you write it on this paper. Well, we’ve had an electrician—he’s kind of disgruntled. You know, because of his paycheck. So on this shortage sheet, he’s been writing “pay” and signing his name.

> Well, we had an hour long meeting last week about how we should eliminate this guy, because he’s upsetting the herd, basically, I guess. Because he’s actually voicing his opinion, you know. I mean, he’s not saying anything anybody else isn’t saying, he’s just bold enough to put it on paper. So, the plant manager said that the guy’s gone, no matter what—even if it takes three guys to replace him. And that’s how it is now and everybody knows it. If you want to keep your job, you shut the hell up.

Despite their keen awareness they’re being treated unfairly, those who have returned to work in the post-meltdown industry are unwilling to jeopardize their long-sought and hard-won positions by voicing resistance to the exploitation they face on the job.

> Although they are, without exception, extremely displeased by the many new requirements and indignities they’ve faced upon returning to work, those I spoke with derive significant pride from the fact that they’re back on the job, working hard for the money they make. “No matter what, it does feel good to be back to work,” says Sharon, continuing, “I’m not happy about a lot of it, mind you, but…it feels good to have a job.” Mike agrees, explaining, “I’m glad I’m working again. Even though it’s kicking my butt, it is good to be out earning money to bring home.” A number of others make similar remarks, noting that being back at work made them feel better about themselves and their situations. “My job is hard…it’s really hard,” says Jody who recently started a new job at Chariot Coach. She continues, “And I’m not making what I should. But at least I’m out doing something. Sitting at home isn’t going to make things better, but things might get better at Chariot.” Lucy is relieved to be working again, as she explains,

> I was gettin’ pretty worried, to be honest. I mean, one the one hand, they say it’s not your fault to be out of work because look around—everybody’s out of work. But when you apply everywhere and month after month passes, you start to wonder. It’s like, “What’s wrong with me?” So even
though this job isn’t near as good as the place I was at before, I’m glad I got it. I was startin’ to feel lazy.

Like Lucy, Dennis, Gerald, Shelley, and Brent also say that finding work has given them relief from the self-doubt that had built over time while they were out of work. “It just shows that this won’t be forever,” says Shelley, explaining, “Working makes me feel more positive about thing in general. Things were real bad for a long time, but they’re gettin’ better.” Those who have returned to work say they are proud of their ability to work hard under more difficult conditions. Noting that they’re “hard workers,” several people explain that finding and holding onto a job in such a bad economy has given them a sense of achievement they sorely missed when not working. Gerald notes, “Things are different, but we’re gonna make it. Look at us! We always come through with something and we do what it takes to pull through, no matter what.”

ENTERPRISING UNEMPLOYED SELVES: R.V. WORKERS IN BAD TIMES

Elkhart’s RV workers have, without question, faced a difficult road: Hit with a disaster unlike anything ever seen in the RV industry before, thousands have found themselves suddenly out of work and searching for employment in the worst labor market in the country. From the inherent confusion entailed in navigating the state unemployment system to the constant stress of worrying over finances, these workers have little choice but to face the very difficult—and very common—challenges associated with joblessness. Indeed, like other manufacturing workers living through industry transformations and dramatic economic change, these individuals have begun to question their value, experience, and approaches to searching for work (Rodriguez and Zavodny 2003; Farber 2005; Maestas and Li 2006; Munnell et al. 2006; Sharone 2007; Heidkamp, Corre, and Van Horn 2010; Smith 2010; Khalifa 2012; Van Oort 2015).

However, unlike those facing unemployment in other contexts, RV workers have a small but significant psychological reprieve: The context of widespread economic pain, industry crisis,
and historically high unemployment has significantly ameliorated the feelings of isolation, failure and shame that commonly result in identity crises for the long-term unemployed. Although the pain of unemployment is very real and, indeed, a major challenge for these workers, they are less likely to internalize the blame and shame normally associated with losing a job. During times of economic trouble when unemployment is widespread, it is not shameful or deviant to be without work, and as a result, workers are far less likely to internalize the self-blame and shame associated with job loss (Kessler, Turner, and House 1988; Turner 1995; Brand, Levy, and Gallo 2008; Charles and Stephens 2004; Clark, Knabe, and Steffan 2010). Moreover, although a cultural emphasis on individualism and independence tends to make working people loathe to accept benefits from the state—in fact, the idea of self-sufficiency is such a core cultural belief that there are strong stigmas attached to receiving all forms of public assistance (Bellah et al 1996; Gans 1996; Sherman 2006; 2009; Seccombe 2010)—RV workers do not feel this common shame. Indeed, though many of the workers I spoke with view social goods such as income assistance and food stamps in an overwhelmingly negative way, the widespread unemployment and economic suffering they’ve endured have removed any such negative feelings associated with receiving unemployment benefits. Thus, the mass layoffs in Elkhart are a sort of heavy rain cloud with a small silver lining: While there’s little doubt that workers would be happier without any rain at all, they do appreciate that they’re not in the storm alone.

The consolation inherent in experiencing a suffering that is shared does not, of course, abrogate the many difficulties associated with long-term unemployment, a bleak labor market, and disempowering work. Facing a radically transformed labor environment, RV workers are experiencing the dishearteningly difficult world of work and employment that characterizes most
manufacturing work in the U.S.—a world that they had been entirely sheltered from until now. Though the new to Elkhart, the emphasis on self-investment to increase employability, ‘selling’ oneself to employers, and stretching further and further to meet increasingly high standards in order to obtain employment have been normative in other fields (white collar work, among low income worker and the urban poor) for many years (Ehrenreich 1990; 2005; Newman 1993; Wilson 1996; Pavetti 1997; Corcoran et al 2000; Kossek 2000; Smith 2001; Smith 2005; Uchitelle 2006; Sharone 2007; Smith and Neuwirth 2008; Garrett-Peters 2009; Smith 2010). As countless studies have demonstrated, the pressure to improve the self—to investment in one’s human capital—as a means of ensuring success in the labor has become a normative feature of the contemporary world of work. Elkhart’s RV workers are now experiencing this increasingly prevalent pressure: In addition to being pushed towards more obvious investments such as training or schooling, they are being encouraged to engage in more subtle forms of human capital investment like improving attitudes and communication skills, envisioning positive outcomes, and growing their social networks (see Smith 2010 overview).

Similarly, those returning to the RV industry following a layoff are discovering a world of work that is new to them but extremely common throughout the manufacturing sector. The high wages, shorter workdays and employment entrepreneurialism that characterized RV work during “good times” have been replaced with harder work, higher expectations, lower wages, insecurity, and significant disempowerment. Elkhart’s RV workers are, essentially, experiencing their first taste of the changes that have swept through and radically altered a number of fields since the 1970’s (Kalleberg 2008). The proportion of American workers who perceive their jobs as insecure has been increasing steadily in the past 40 years (Fullerton and Wallace 2005). RV workers’ experiences are a testament to the fact that growing employment insecurity has rapidly
increased in the wake of the financial crisis and onset of the great recession (Madrick 2012). A growing sense of disempowerment and insecurity in the workplace is both a macro-social development that has swept through American employment in the last few decades (Fullerton and Wallace 2005; Landipo and Wilkinson 2005; Kalleberg 2008; Hollister 2011) as well as a common post-downsizing/post-layoff development (Burke and Nelson 1998; Baker and Demerouti 2007; Quinlan and Bohle 2009; Kalleberg 2011).

Those back on the production floor who must work “harder than ever” to meet increasingly high standards are experiencing the intensification of work and increased pressure that has plagued broad swathes of the U.S. workforce in recent years (Landipo and Wilkinson 2005; Maume and Purcell 2007) for many years and is particularly forceful following industry change and organizational restructuring (Kalleberg 2011). The fact that RV production workers are “making less than ever before” for the very hard work that they do is illustrative of the broader social reality that blue collar workers have experienced wage stagnation and decline since the 1970’s (Kalleberg 2003; 2008; Hollister 2011; Kalleberg 2011; Mishel 2012; Autor and Dorn 2013) and that workers’ wages tend to be lower following long-term unemployment (Jacobson, LaLonde, and Sullivan 1993; Davis and von Wachter 2011; Schmieder, von Wachter and Bender 2012; Nichols, Mitchell, and Lindner 2013). Similarly, increased insecurity is not at all isolated to returned RV workers—more and more Americans have experienced similar employment precarity (Fullerton and Wallace 2005) and this is particularly true for those who return to work following organizational restructuring or a layoff (Baker and Demerouti, 2007; Kalleberg 2011). Feelings of disempowerment and devaluation in the workplace are not at all unique to RV workers back on the floor—these are increasingly common feelings among workers across the economy (Kalleberg 2003; 2008; 2011; Lippman 2008; Glavin 2013) are
particularly keenly felt by those returning to work following significant changes in their industry or organization (Burke and Nelson 1998; Quinlan and Bohle 2009).

Of course, although bleak labor markets and disempowering worlds of work are not at all unique, the powerful entrepreneurial culture and values so embraced by Elkhart’s RV workers have made their experiences in navigating these environs somewhat unique.

**Entrepreneurial Commitment: “That’s how we are. Always working to be better.”**

Explaining, “I’m a hard worker and I don’t stop,” Rodney notes, “That’s what it is for a lot of us. We show them that we keep trying and we’ll eventually pull up out of this. We don’t just fall down and stay down like some people. We get up.” Rodney’s comments reflect the broadly shared understanding that RV workers’ determination, work ethic, and willingness to do whatever is takes to survive are qualities that make their community special. Although upset by the downturn and thrown for a loop by the many changes in their industry, workers emphasize again and again that they are inventive, hard workers, and willing and able to do whatever they must to weather the crisis and return to prosperity. Richard asserts,

> We always do it, no matter how bad it gets. I’m tellin’ you, we do what it takes to break through with somethin’ and get things back to boomin’ again. Elkhart is special, I tell you. Lived here all my life and I seen bad times before, but we pull out of it. That’s why everyone’s watchin’ us right now because they know we’re tough and we don’t stop. Never have.

Richard is not alone in his faith in Elkhart’s unique entrepreneurial culture. Susan shares these feelings, noting that RV workers are uniquely innovative and dedicated to creating solutions. She explains,

> I can tell you, I’ve been to other places for work-- Oregon and Illinois. And I know that the workforces are not the same out there. They’re really very nice people but we are more driven. We’re more creative. We are always trying to improve. It’s in our nature. We take it on ourselves and you can see it now, from what we’re doing. Taking classes, going back to school, learning new things. We aren’t going to sit around and wait for things to get better. We can’t. We’re going to make ourselves better.
Susan, Richard, and most of the others who spoke with me point say that RV workers’ widespread participation in professional development classes and retraining programs are evidence of their unique work ethic and commitment to improvement. According to Ralph, he and those who have taken advantage of the state’s offer to retrain workers exemplify Elkhart’s unique spirit. He says, “I have faith. I mean look at me—I’m 62 years old and I learned to be a pharmacy tech! And the class I was in was full, too. That’s how we are. Always working to be better.” Noting the WorkOne professional development sessions she’s attended have been full of unemployed RV workers, Donna says, “It’s because we all know how to step up. We’re not afraid to learn new things and get in there and figure out how we can be better workers and get good jobs. That’s how we are here.” Justin agrees, explaining that although he was somewhat skeptical about some of the professional development sessions he’d attended, he did so because “It’s how we were raised. We are hard workers and we figure out how to keep up. If things are going one way, we do what we need to do to keep up with it. Even if it means learning Oprah shit!” These and other similar comments illuminate workers’ determination to adapt themselves to fit into the new economy—something that many say is part and parcel of Elkhart’s unique entrepreneurial culture. Elton explains, 

At first we all thought it wasn’t going to get as bad as it did. Then we were in shock for a while. But then, as time wore on we kicked into gear because that’s what we do, you know… The President talks about education and learning new things and he’s right and we know it. So I took a resume class and a class on marketing yourself. Times are changing and here in Elkhart we know we gotta change too. Not just change business but change how we work and what we do. And we’re doing it. It may not be easy or fun but RV work isn’t easy or fun either!

Discussions of efforts to increase employability through professionalization, education, and retraining resonate with a commitment to self-improvement born of recognition that such improvement is necessary for survival. While all are, unsurprisingly, displeased with the events that have essentially forced their hand, RV workers are nevertheless proud of their work ethic
and ability to learn, grow, and change. It is important to note, however, that these discussions of their community’s ability to survive the bleak economy are less triumphant than they are resigned. Although confident in their ability to innovate and work hard, these individuals are also acutely aware of the difficulty of the task at hand. Workers believe that, ultimately, the onus of survival is on them. In the end, then, whether by participating in professional development, furthering one’s education, or retraining in a new field, each worker is responsible to do what it takes to navigate the bleak economy. Elton explains, “We will do what we gotta do because that’s what we always do.” Nathan agrees that he and other workers will do what it takes to survive and explains that Elkhart’s unique entrepreneurial spirit would allow nothing less. He says,

Well, see, Elkhart has the most patents of any other city in America because we invent new things, that’s our heritage. And I kinda think that we’re doing that now too, with people. Learning new ways to work, new jobs. The RV industry’s going to be very different from now on, and I think eventually we’re gonna have new industries here too. So that means we have to be new kinds of workers and that’s what we’re doing with the classes and all. Other towns don’t react like this, I don’t think. We’re all like, “What’s next? Let’s do it.”

Clearly, Elkhart’s overwhelming entrepreneurial culture has profoundly influenced RV workers’ perceptions of a newly bleak economy and disempowering world of work. Though not the happy entrepreneurs they were during “good times,” individuals continue to identify as independent, hardworking, enterprising (even if grudgingly) beings. They remain committed to the understanding that, rather than merely a requirement for economic, improving and investing in oneself is a personal moral obligation. In many ways, then, these RV workers are a neoliberal ideal.
CHAPTER SEVEN: NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE

Discussing the value she says she cherishes above all others, Patricia says,

Freedom is all that matters. It’s the foundation for everything else. You can’t have love or kindness without true freedom. Freedom comes with freedom to screw up, which a lot of people do. It also means freedom to go as far as you want. Freedom makes us all the same and then we make choices from there, so that’s it…it’s all about the freedom to be who you are and do what you do.

Patricia’s reverent reflection on freedom and its many gifts (individual choice, activity, success, identity) gives voice to the entrepreneurial definition of freedom that is the foundation of neoliberal ideology—it’s a profoundly influential take on freedom that shapes individuals’ perspectives, choices, and, ultimately, broader social structures. As my research reveals, the powerfully resonant understandings of, and approaches to, individual purpose, economic order, and state power inhered in the neoliberal worldview are highly appealing and, ultimately, highly consequential. This brief concluding chapter discusses the inherently individualizing, depoliticizing, and productive nature of neoliberal governmentality as evidenced by the lived daily realities of Elkhart’s RV workers.

Individualizing Power

In the neoliberal worldview, all relations are reduced to the individual level. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher best exemplified this sentiment. When she was asked about those who request government services, she responded: “They are casting their problems at society. And, you know, there’s no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then, also, to look after our neighbors” (qtd. in Keay 1987). According to the neoliberal ideological worldview, then, the world consists of individuals making individual decisions. This concentration on microeconomic actions as the foundation of society exemplifies the intensive neoliberal focus on individuals.
Neoliberal governmentality is an inherently individualizing force that appeals to efficiency, independence, and freedom to blunt movements toward collective solutions (Bourdieu 1998). As an ideology that prizes the individual over the collective, neoliberal logic locates all value and potential in the singular enterprising individual (*homo economicus*). In turn, then, collectives are understood to be ineffective, inefficient burdens that threaten individual liberty (duGay 1996; Rose and Miller 2008). Focused on and enacted through micro social forms, neoliberal governmentality effects rupture in collectivities in a variety of ways: In good times, workers’ enterprise entailed a prizing of individual satisfaction (job hopping, consumption) and gain (chasing the money circuit) over the interests of the collective (employee loyalty, family time). In bad times, pressures to increase employability similarly direct RV workers towards individual enterprise (education, professional development) and away from collective organization (unionization, activism). Neoliberal governmental practices, then, are “technologies of the self” (Rose 1992; 1999; Dean 2009) that ultimately detract from the strength and power of the collective (Bourdieu 1998). As evidenced in earlier chapters’ discussions of workers’ core values and employment entrepreneurialism, enterprising selves eschew labor unions and other collective institutions and resources (state benefits) in favor of “going it alone” –the approach that any truly entrepreneurial figure would choose (Bourdieu1998; Thornton 1999).

Highly individualized explanations of success and failure like those shared by the workers I spoke with are an effective tool for justifying the elimination of state entitlement programs. Neoliberal ideology holds that individuals who are unable to succeed in a system of flourishing and equal opportunity must be left to their own devices. Indeed, “under regimes of neoliberalism, it is no longer legitimate for the poor to be the recipients of public services;
consequently, the poor are turned into consumers to justify the withdrawal of state funds from social programs” (Spiegel 2006:436). Asking taxpayers to subsidize the failure of others through state intervention is seen as unfair and an infringement of individual freedom—a sentiment commonly voiced by a number of RV workers. The reduction in state aid to needy individuals in the past twenty years has been met with widespread neoliberal approval. Though there has been more resistance in the American population at large, there have been no major efforts to increase aid to those in poverty through state mechanisms, largely as a result of an understanding expressed by many of the workers I spoke with: Poverty is a moral failing, not a political issue to be addressed by an inherently biased and political collective structure like the state.

Depoliticizing Power

The neoliberal belief that markets will regulate society gives rise to one of the most profound tensions in the neoliberal political worldview. This tension is between neoliberalism and U.S. democracy. The U.S. was founded upon the belief that the democratic process will regulate society. Neoliberal thinkers are, however, highly suspicious of existing forms of democracy. They consider the U.S. democratic process to be dangerous to true freedom, as it allows for the possibility of interference with markets. Hayek (1991) noted, … “there was an irreconcilable conflict between democracy and capitalism – except that it is not democracy as such but the particular forms of democratic organization, now regarded as the only possible forms of democracy, which will produce a progressive expansion of governmental control of economic life even if the majority of the people wish to preserve a market economy” (389). In this worldview, markets are the truest form of democracy, and existing forms are inferior and threatening to true freedom (Harvey 2005, Gamble 2001). Also, “since markets express the will of the people, virtually any criticism of business could be described as an act of despicable
contempt for the common man” (Frank 2001: 30). Such sentiments were abundantly evident among the workers I spoke with—from those who feared state violations of privacy and freedom to those who simply believe the state to be incompetent, all had powerful distrust of and dislike for state power—in theory. In reality, however, although these workers don’t like or trust the state, they do recognize its value.

Another important element of neoliberal ideology is the de-politicization of nearly everything: “Neoliberalism is itself a deeply depoliticizing paradigm, whose effect is to subordinate social and political priorities, such as might arise from a more dialogic, responsive and democratic politics, to perceived economic imperatives and to the ruthless efficiency of the market” (Hay 2004: 523). By naturalizing the free market as the best, most free, and most equitable force in the world, neoliberals argue that there is really nothing political about the free market at all. Neoliberal ideology maintains that while state and social institutions such as labor unions and activist groups are political, the free market is apolitical and objective. Neoliberal depoliticization is a powerfully influential reality in Elkhart, where nearly all of those I spoke with agreed that the market is inherently fair, neutral, and far less political than the state. These individuals, then, don’t recognize capitalism as a political mode of economy and, as such, do not question that it is the best economic system possible. As a result of this depoliticization, then, most workers’ criticisms of markets turned into criticisms of people (greedy businessmen) or institutions (under-regulatory state). This vein of neoliberal ideology is important for shielding capitalism from critique. It has been successful by naturalizing free market capitalism, making it appear “exogenous – and therefore relatively uncontrollable” (Fourcade-Gourinchas 2002: 535).

Colin Hay (2004) reinforces this point, noting the de-politicization of free market policy is responsible for its continued existence: “Macroeconomic policy (certainly monetary policy) is
thus regulated to a purely technical and entirely apolitical matter beyond the sphere of effective
democratic scrutiny or accountability. The perpetuation of macroeconomics is guaranteed” (518).
Part and parcel of this scientism is the insistence that the economic system is transparent. Just as
science is a straightforward discipline, so is economics. Neoliberal ideology “presents free-
market capitalism as a system of transparency and accountability, with quarterly analyst reports,
credit ratings, conference calls, and above all, the digitally driven market to keep everything
straight” (Mason 2009: 139). It is hard to argue with technical, unbiased, and transparent science
– thus, neoliberal ideology makes it hard to argue with free market approaches to governance,
economics, and social relations.

Appealing, Productive Power

The overwhelming majority of theoretical and empirical explorations of neoliberalism
depict it to be a relatively oppressive (and horrifying) hegemonic order that threatens to
overcome or destroy everything in its path. Such narrow constructions are inaccurate and
extremely counterproductive. Although neoliberal economic and political practices have,
unquestionably, produced a universe of social harms and injustices, it is essential to recognize
that neoliberalism is, fundamentally, an appealing and productive mode of governance. My
research reveals that neoliberal ideology is appealing and highly resonant. In our discussions of
various economic, social, and political questions, a large proportion of those who share the
neoliberal perspective described their opinions and ideas as “patriotic,” “American,” and
“traditional,” and a few of these individuals mentioned invoked the U.S. constitution and
founding fathers in explaining their reasoning. As discussed in Chapter 4, neoliberal ideology is
appealing because it is resonant. From its valuation of freedom and inherently equalizing
definition of humans to its centralization of the individual and valorization of adventure, it is a
very American—and, as such, a broadly appealing—perspective. Thus, it is hardly surprising that so many of the works I spoke with express an admiration of many neoliberal practices and policies.

Neoliberal power is also productive, positive power—a reality that most treatments of the neoliberal order would do well to remember. As Foucault (1980) reminds us:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (119).

Contemporary neoliberal government—the conduct of conducts—is not a force of repression, but rather, it is a force of creation: RV workers are not experiencing power as a punishment or deprivation. They are experiencing power as a direction to invest in themselves, to improve their skills, to create—to engage in enterprise. This is, again, an appealing and resonant form of power, and is particularly appealing to those in Elkhart because it reinforces the much cherished community reverence of entrepreneurial activity. As I demonstrate in Chapter 5, workers have been engaging in individual enterprise for a very long time, and, moreover, they were engaging in successful, fulfilling enterprises that produced valuable returns (empowerment, high incomes, exciting lifestyles). While not as rewarding or thrilling as employment entrepreneurialism (job hopping, chasing the money circuit, running), current unemployment entrepreneurialism (professional development, education) is neither alienating nor foreign to these workers. Accustomed to the individualism, risk, unpredictability, and flexibility that enterprise entails, these workers are able accept the neoliberalization of unemployment because they’ve long been used to a similarly market structured world of work.

The experiences of Elkhart’s RV workers clearly illustrate different picture of neoliberal governmentality than the one most often recognized and discussed by theorists, researchers, and
critics: Neoliberal power can be liberating, exhilarating, productive and rewarding force. Enterprise is not universally felt and experienced and disempowering and exploitative. As was the case for RV workers in “good times,” though it may ultimately undermine significant social structures and relationships, individualistic market activity is not universally experienced as disempowering and exploitative. Context, culture, and difference matter if we wish to build accurate and useful understandings of power and its practice (Dudley 1994; Ong 2006). Of course, there’s little doubt that neoliberal practice can be socially destructive. The painful lived experiences of recession—depression, self-blame, distrust of the state and others, feelings of helplessness, an inability to articulate or realize more equitable solutions—detailed in Chapter 6 ensures that the current study will prove an addition to the massive academic literature that detailing these harms.

The social havoc that is unleashed by hegemonic thought and practice is the very reason it is imperative to faithfully acknowledge and describe the appealing, positive, productive face of neoliberal power. As Foucault (1980) explains, “Nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level are not also changed” (60). Change, is, of course, impossible without understanding. If we do not accurately understand how power works in and through individuals’ lived experiences, we will never successfully challenge the harms it produces. While it is absolutely crucial to recognize that neoliberal freedom is a cage, it is equally important to truly, accurately understand the lived realities of the caged.
REFERENCES


Carrington, William J., and Bruce C. Fallick. 2015. "Do We Know Why Earnings Fall with Job Displacement?" Retrieved September 1, 2015 (http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2390&context=key_workplace)


317


racism-sparked-the-financial-crisis/).


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Demographic Information:
Before we move further into our discussion, I’d like to ask you a few basic questions that will help me better understand you and where you’re coming from. Remember, you can decline to answer any question at any time:

• What is your age?

• What is the highest level of education you have completed?

• What is your own yearly income?

• What is your total household income, including all earners in your household?

• What is your current marital status?

• What is your religious affiliation?

• What is your race?

• What is the highest level of education your mother has completed?

• What is the highest level of education your father has completed?

Employment Experiences
(If currently employed)

• What do you do at your job?

• What is your job like? What is it like to do your job?

• How did you get into this job/field?

• How long do you plan on staying in this job/field?

• Is anyone else in your family employed in factories? Has anyone in your family ever been employed in factories?

• Is there anything you like about your job?

• Is there anything you dislike about your job?

• Do you feel like your job is secure? Do you worry about the future of your job?

• What kind of benefits do you get along with your job? Health insurance? Vacation?
(If currently laid off)

• What did you do at your job?

• Is anyone else in your family employed in factories? Has anyone in your family ever been employed in factories?

• When were you laid off?

• Did the layoff come as a surprise to you?

• How was your lay off explained to you? What did your boss/supervisor say?

• How many other people at your plant were laid off? Did the plant shut down?

• Do you expect to be called back to work?

• Have you been drawing unemployment?

• Have you been looking for other work? If so, how is that search going?

• Tell me about some of the changes in your life since you’ve been laid off.

• What are your plans for the near future?

• Are there special opportunities or programs for people who have been laid off? Do you plan on taking advantage of any of these programs? Why or why not?

• Apart from the economic hardship, what would you say has been most difficult about this layoff?

Recession Experiences

• Tell me about how the current economic downturn has affected you. What things in your life have changed?

• Can you tell me about some of the changes in your community that you’ve noticed since the layoffs began?

• How do you think the economy affecting your friends and family?

• How do you feel about all of these changes?

• How are you dealing with the economic situation? How is your community dealing with it?
• Do you feel that things are getting better, staying the same, or getting worse than they were about a year ago? Why?

• Regarding the future, what do you see happening with the economy in this area?

• What about this community? Do you think things will be better, about the same, or not as good ten years from now as they are now?

The Economy
• There has been a lot of talk about the economy and how it has gotten to the point that it is at.
  o How do you think the current recession came about?

• Who or what is to blame for the current economic situation?

• Do you think anything can or should be done to fix the situation? What do you think can be done?

• If you were making decisions about how to fix the economy, what would be most important to you? What would you do? Why?

• Do you trust the government to fix the economy?

Government Intervention and Federal Stimulus
• One topic in the news has been the problem of troubled industries. Some businesses shut down and they may or may not start up again. Some examples include:
  o The problems in the auto industry as with GM
  o The closings and layoffs in many RV plants.

• There is disagreement over what the government should do (if anything) to help the companies or the workers and communities that are involved. When you think about this issue of troubled industry, what comes to mind?

• Do you think the government has any responsibility to help people who are unemployed? Why or why not? What should the state do to help?

• What should the relationship between the economy and the government be like?

• Are you familiar with the federal government stimulus plan?

• Why do you think the federal government decided to create this stimulus plan?

• What is your opinion of the stimulus plan?

• Do you feel that the stimulus plan is fair? Why or why not?
• Do you think that the federal stimulus plan will help the economy? Do you think that it will help your situation at all?

• I’ve been talking to a lot of people who have opinions about the President’s plan for fixing the economy. What is your opinion of his plan?

Financial Bailouts
• Are you familiar with the federal government bailouts of corporations such as AIG and Chrysler? Why do you think the federal government decided to create these bailouts?

• What is your opinion of the bailouts?

• Do you feel that the bailouts are fair? Why or why not?

• Who, if anyone, do you think will benefit from the bailouts?

• Do you think that the federal government bailouts will help the economy? Do you think they will help you at all?

• There has been a lot of talk about many leaders in companies that have received bailouts getting large bonuses. Are you familiar with these bonuses?
  o If so, what is your opinion of the bonuses? Do you think they are fair? Why or why not?

Neoliberalism
• People often use labels like “liberal” and “conservative” to identify the political leanings of others. Using terms such as these, how would you describe your own political views?

• What is the basic difference between a liberal and a conservative, anyway, in terms of their political beliefs?

• Generally speaking, do you consider yourself a Republican, a Democrat, or something else?

• Why do you favor your preferred party?

• What do you dislike about the opposed party?
• Are you a member of a union? If so, why are you part of a union? If not, why aren’t you in a union?

• What is your opinion of labor unions?

• Are you familiar with the Employee Free Choice Act? “Card Check Law”? What is your opinion of this possible new law?
• “Do you agree with the statement that ‘Most poor people in this country are poor because they spend their money wastefully’”? 

• For those who have been subject to layoffs, do you think they had any responsibility in their being laid off? 

• There is a great deal of talk about those who are losing their homes during this time. What is your opinion of why so many people are losing their homes? Do you think anything should be done to help those losing their homes? 

• Many people seem to be suffering a great deal during this recession – why do you think that is? Do you think that people are largely responsible for the situation they find themselves in? 

• In general, who would you say should take care of the economy in this country – the government or businesses? 

• Do you trust the government to take care of the economy? Why or why not? 

• Do you trust business to take care of the economy? Why or Why not? 

Media Coverage 
• There has been a lot of media coverage of Elkhart in the last few months, in particular in the national media. Major networks such as MSNBC and CNN have focused long-term reports on the many aspects of the economic recession and its effects in Elkhart. Are you familiar with any of this coverage? If so, which outlet’s coverage are you most familiar with? 

• Why do you think they’ve chosen Elkhart to focus their reports on? 

• In general, what kind of job do you think the media does in explaining what is going on? 

• Do you think they get it right? Why or why not? 

• Finally, are there any questions that I have not asked that I should be asking? Is there anything that you feel would be important for me to know about you in order to better understand your perspective?