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by

Manata Hashemi

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California – Berkeley

Professor Mártin Sánchez-Jankowski, Chair

This dissertation demonstrates how poor youth in Iran manage to not simply survive, but to become socio-economically mobile given their limited opportunities. The study examines how poor young people's motivations and aspirations affect the strategies that they use to attain their goals. Social scientists have argued that poor people in the Middle East resist the consequences of large-scale economic restructuring by reasserting their power within extended family networks or maximizing their wealth by engaging in petty illegal practices. However, if we assume that these theoretical perspectives are correct, then we should expect that all poor young people in Iran would adopt similar practices in response to similar macroeconomic conditions. This study nevertheless finds that there are patterned differences in the ways that poor youth in the country think and react to their social worlds. Current theoretical perspectives, due to their exclusive focus on the poor's reactive acts of political agency, cannot provide explanations of how varying motivations inform how poor individuals move in their pursuits.

This dissertation draws from two years of ethnographic research in two urban capitals in Iran, Sari and Tehran, to examine the mechanisms involved in shaping poor young people's ideas of the good life and the strategies they use to attain them. The findings show how three, interrelated elements help to explain precisely how poverty influences individual and/or collective action: (1) the moral compass guiding poor youth, (2) their conceptions of the desirable that arise from this moral compass, and (3) the strategies they deploy to get their desires.

My findings suggest that poor youth adopt two moral systems that provide them with a sense of right and wrong and an evaluative code for conduct: that of honor and that of the Muslim work ethic (chapter 2). By enabling poor youth to lay claim to the respect that is accrued to the honorable, these moral systems provide them with an intangible route for social status as well as a unique scale that poor youth and their communities use to assess each other's honor. In this way, these two moral codes function as a type of stratification system hierarchy among youth in the lower classes.

While the moral codes of honor and work are the means by which individual character is sustained, they also influence poor young people's ideas of what constitutes the good life (chapter 3). While these wants are not much different from the desires of the Iranian middle class, the ends – either honor or prestige – that each group sees as salient for pursuit are key for explaining differences in outcomes between the two classes. Furthermore, different combinations of contingencies shape how successful poor youth are in realizing their pursuits. The tools that poor youth themselves bring to the table including their social contacts, street smarts and risk-taking abilities in combination with their limited opportunities for formal sector employment and beliefs in divine determinism operate to either facilitate or thwart poor young people's ability to get what they want.

In attempting to pursue their wants, poor youth deploy various strategies that revolve around accumulation and investment (chapter 4). Placing effort by accumulating and investing is consistent with these young people's adoption of the Muslim work ethic and the moral code of honor. For the former, effort is instrumental to socio-economic achievement; for the latter, undertaking strategies to escape poverty is critical for the young person to be able to support his family in order to maintain his honor and subsequently enhance his social standing. However, the presence of facilitating and constraining factors, not the least of which include the individual's place of residence, his/her familial ethos and his/her ability to take on moderate risks influence the extent to which the poor youth will be able to bring his/her efforts to fruition. Moreover, strategies such as accumulating capital to start a business or investing by participating in mutual exchange networks are contingent on the resources that the individual can bring into effect. As such, the individual's own initiative must be placed within the context of the social and economic resources that he can bring into his quest for upward mobility. For instance, while participating in gift-giving and exchange networks adds to the coffers of the poor youth, it only does so if the poor youth has been able to oblige his end of the reciprocal exchange. In this way, the success of a particular socio-economic strategy is dependent on the interaction between individual initiative and the resources that the poor youth has at his/her disposal for undertaking a particular course of action.

The findings of this dissertation show that attempts to explain the nature of poverty among poor youth in Iran cannot ignore the salient role that cultural systems play in shaping poor people's strategies of action. The strategies that poor young people deploy to better their lives emerge as a result of a particular type of social environment found in Iranian society that is centered on the dual pursuits of honor and work. Poor young people's strategies subsequently materialize as a cultural response that seeks to improve their social standing and economic positioning within this social world. Providing explanations of how individuals in the Middle East respond to poverty requires us to move beyond static theoretical perspectives of political agency and toward an understanding of the widely diverse nature of poor people's struggles that reflect the highly integrative nature of urban poverty. It is only by doing so that we can sharpen our theories of poverty to reflect how conditions of economic deprivation persist, how they provide a sense of purpose to actors who are caught in them, and how they can ultimately be overcome.

For my parents who committed themselves to nurturing my educational pursuits
and for Farzan who helped this dissertation see the light of day.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What first struck one about young Mohammad Karimi's[1] house was its exterior. A one-story concrete and brick abode with a pitched roof, small windows, and red iron gated door that tilted at its hinges stood derelict at the end of a dirt road in the outskirts of Sari, a major provincial city in the north of Iran. To its right, the house boasted an equally unkempt garden littered with rocks and dirt. Tall corn stalks that bowed violently in the wind were one of the few signs of life in this small patch of land.

The house's deteriorating air seemed to extend to its interior, with its unpainted concrete walls, exposed ceiling bulbs and large furniture-less main living space. And yet, the dwelling's inconspicuous dignity was apparent to anyone willing to take the time to really look. Oversized wool rugs with Persian motifs lay on the cement floors. A large, carefully hung colorful swath of fabric separated the living from the sleeping quarters. Small pots of fake plants expertly hung above the island separating the tiled kitchen from the living area. A small television set sat on a lopsided wooden entertainment unit decorated with ceramic tchotchkes. A memorabilia, a framed picture of Mohammad's father as a young soldier visiting the shrine of Imam Reza, hung on the wall. A pot of tea stood brewing on the large samovar in the kitchen, as the family knew they were to be expecting company. An almost quaint charm and subdued sense of intimacy percolated the entire house.

As my relationship with the Karimi family grew over the course of two years, I learned that the family had saved up enough money to be eligible for loans to buy a plot of land in this seaside district. Though the house seemed to be falling apart, it was actually undergoing construction. The slow construction process – which proceeded only

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[1] In order to adhere to the protocol of protecting my subjects' anonymity and confidentiality, I have used fictitious names throughout this dissertation to identify people, streets, neighborhoods and establishments.

when the Karimis had enough money to finance an addition – had given the dwelling a deteriorating air that belied the craftsmanship, effort and cost behind each new building phase. The Karimis, while poor, had, through sheer perseverance and risk-taking been able to secure a piece of land in a relatively middle class peri-urban area, hundreds of miles away from their rural village in central Iran. "Our family back in the village tells us we're Northerners now! They don't even know where the North is!" Mohammad's sister would later exclaim.

The Karimis are not unique. Throughout the course of my research among the young, lower strata of Iranian society, I found countless Karimis – individuals who, according to one poor[2] working Iranian mother, "[tried] to make the most of the little they [had]." The shoddy exteriors of their homes often disguised the neatness and meticulous attention to detail of their well-decorated interiors. Their donning of the latest fashion trends and accessories concealed their desperate financial straits and the fact that they sometimes did not have a proper dinner to eat. Thus, one cannot rely on appearances to understand the dynamics of poverty among the young and the poor in Iran.

For the most part of the past half century, scholarly preoccupation with Iran has focused on the country's exteriors. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 – as one of the most cataclysmic world events in the past hundred years that prompted the rise of the world's first constitutional theocracy – has often served as the focal point of this scholarly attention. The largest country in the Middle East and a non-Arab state that has, since the Islamic Revolution, pursued a foreign policy of eliminating outside influences and forging strong relations with developing and non-aligned countries,[3] Iran has been viewed as an anomaly among the countries of the region. Scores of articles and books have subsequently focused on the Revolution and its various influences in political ideology (Abrahamian 1993), civil society (Kazemi 1980; Keddie 2006; Kinzer 2008), and more recently, in sexual politics (Afary 2009; Mahdavi 2008) and youth cultures (Basmenji 2005; Varzi 2006). Unfortunately, this research has also simultaneously given rise to a media and public policy discourse on Iran that has largely been defined in terms of binaries: tradition versus modernity, religious versus secular, rich versus poor – binaries that only reinforce the country's exceptional and almost pariah-like status.[4]

The present study will look beyond the macropolitics of the Islamic Revolution and its publicity as well as the stress on Iran's imagined standing among developing nations to analyze the behaviors of ordinary young Iranians. I attempt to go beyond the country's ideology, rhetoric and public image to unearth what is happening in the small backstreets, in the local bazaars and shops, and behind closed doors. In doing so, this study intends to reveal the everyday lives of the young, poor and struggling in Iran. This group comprises 35 percent of Iran's population and is regarded as the backbone of the

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[2] I use the term "poor" in this study to refer to individuals in Iran whose household income falls below approximately 600,000 tomans/month (Sari) and 800,000 tomans/month (Tehran) poverty line set by the government (for a family of four). See "Measurement and Economic Analysis of Urban Poverty", Statistical Center of Iran, March 2011. Most of the poor youth in this study lived well below these poverty lines. Their average household income averaged around 300,000 – 400,000 tomans/month.

[3] The population of Iran hovers around 73 million people (World Bank 2012).

[4] Recent memoirs written by Iranians are also good examples of discourses that often rely on such tired dichotomies. See for instance, Asayesh 2000 and Nafisi 2008.

Islamic Republic[5] by its custodians.[6] However, we have heard little about this population, about their struggles to advance and about the ways that they attempt to carve a meaningful life for themselves.

A large part of the neglect that poor youth in the country have received has been due to the social and economic conditions of Iran itself. Natural oil and gas reserves have ensured that the country maintains a middle-income status among developing countries (Molavi 2003).[7] Iran's relatively large supplies of natural wealth have not led to the rise of the pockets of deep poverty that one finds in India. Unlike neighboring Afghanistan, an expansive system of state-sponsored subsidies has ensured widespread availability to electricity and safe drinking water for much of Iran's poor. Nor have the poor in Iran experienced the high fertility and illiteracy rates that are prevalent in countries like Yemen, thanks to post-Revolution increases in education and family planning (Salehi-Isfahani 2008). And yet, despite the absence of these visible markers of severe poverty, the absolute poverty rate in Iran rivals that of countries in sub-Saharan Africa: approximately 55 percent of urban Iranians now live under the poverty line, which government averages place at 630 USD a month (Statistical Center of Iran 2012).

This complex economic climate has led many analysts to tout poor urban youth in Iran as alienated and socially excluded (Elder and Schmidt 2006; Salehi-Isfahani 2008; Silver 2007). This view would be inaccurate and the present study aims to show the variety and complexity of the lives of those youth caught in poverty, a generation that cannot be summarily characterized as "repressed" or "excluded." The present moment in Iran and the broader Middle East is a time of great uncertainty. By showing the struggles of one young generation to live, work and play, this study attempts to give an idea into the region's future.

A LOOK AT POVERTY IN IRAN

In the 1960s a new phase began in Iran. It started out as an unassuming campaign that found its strength and organizational basis in the modernization policies that were initiated in the 1930s by Reza Shah, and later intensified by his son, Mohammad Reza Shah (known simply as the shah). Rising oil revenues during the reign of the latter contributed to an intensive program of Western-based socio-economic development – deemed as the White Revolution – that led to the rapid industrialization of Iranian cities. Between 1966-1976, the presumed widespread availability of manufacturing jobs coupled with reduced agricultural income and low quality of life[8] as a result of the shah's land reforms, led more than two million disillusioned rural poor to begin a long migration to

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[5] I use the terms "Islamic Republic" and "Iran" interchangeably throughout the dissertation to refer to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[6] Per the categorization by the Islamic Republic of Iran, I define youth in this study as those individuals between the ages of 15-29. Young people between the ages of 15 and 29 comprise 35% of Iran's population. The exact numbers of poor youth in the country are not known.

[7] The Islamic Republic is the world's third largest producer of oil and has the third largest proven gas and oil reserves in the world, thus enabling it to remain significant as long as the hydrocarbon era lasts (Abrahamian 2006).

[8] In a study conducted by Kazemi (1980) in 1977, 85% of a random sample of 224 rural-urban migrants to Tehran stated that they left their villages due to unsatisfactory employment and inadequate income.

capital-intensive urban centers.[9] These migrants came to join the ranks of the new urban poor as unskilled workers and laborers (Cleveland 1999; Kazemi 1980). The majority settled in the southern sections of Tehran and resided in residential units ranging from squatter settlements to one-two room rented dwellings (Kazemi 1980). By 1976, the urban population of Tehran had reached more than 4.5 million (Madanipour 1998).

During this same time, an exiled Ayatalloh Ruhollah Khomeini denounced the shah's regime for a host of social and economic issues, not the least of which was the shah's neglect to bring essential services to the countrysides and his failure to build low-income housing for the new masses of urban poor. Khomeini's pro-*mostazafin* (poor) discourse was reflected in soundbites that exalted the poor and the slum-dwellers and later became slogans of the Islamic Revolution (Abrahmian 2008).[10] Encouraged by Khomeini's populist promises and frustrated by their aggravated employment opportunities, their worsening living conditions, and the growing maldistribution of wealth, the new masses of urban migrant poor came to constitute a major opposition force that helped topple the shah's regime and usher in the new Islamic Republic in 1979.

Between 1980-1989, motivated by the Iran-Iraq war, Iran's new Islamic state consolidated its power, in large part, by expanding its reach among the poor. Led by Khomeini, the Islamic Republic denounced liberalism and allocated large industries of the national economy to the public sector, leaving behind light industries, agriculture and services to the private realm. The economics ministry distributed ration cards to the poor that provided them with basic goods and necessities. The new regime distributed more than 850,000 hectares of confiscated agro-business land to some 220,000 peasant families in the provinces of Gurgan, Mazandaran, and Khuzestan, and extended electricity and piped water to villages (Abrahamian 2008). A quarter of the regime's annual budget was further spent in subsidies for basic foodstuffs, electricity, sanitation and piped water to both the rural and urban poor.

These generous subsidies, however, did not last. The death of Khomeini in 1989 ushered in a new decade of liberalism under the presidency of Hashemi-Rafsanjani and the leadership of Khomeini's successor, Khameini. After a decade of self-imposed economic isolation, the Islamic Republic embarked on an intensive campaign of reconstruction. Spurred by Rafsanjani, the government – like those of many other developing countries at the time – endeavored to integrate itself into the new global economy by applying for a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and by espousing structural adjustment policies based on the World Bank model. A modern-industrial liberal economic model was implemented resulting in a rise in incomes and the

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[9] Land reforms constituted the centerpiece of the White Revolution. While the reforms were able to weaken the power of notables and distribute excess land to farmers, most peasants were left with little to no land and without basic amenities including piped water and electricity (Abrahmian 2008). The land reform called for large landowners to sell and/or lease their lands to sharecroppers who worked on the same lands, but the program excluded rural wage earners who comprised 40 percent of cultivating villagers. The resulting unequal distribution of land not only created a rural middle class, but it also contributed to provoking those who had received little or no land to migrate to the cities (Madanipour 1998).

[10] For instance, Khomeini declared that "Islam represents the slum-dwellers (*zaghehnishin*), not the palace-dwellers (*khakhneshin*) and that "Islam belongs to the oppressed (*mostazafin*), not to the oppressors (*mostakbaren*)" (Abrahamian 2008).

rapid growth of highly affluent social groups. Along with the expansive urban growth and urban migration that it created, Iran's march toward a global market economy also gave way to an urban poor population who had to increasingly rely on themselves, rather than on state subsidies, for survival. Indeed, the new government abolished rationing and cut subsidies to large families.

The rise to power of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 ushered in a new reformist period in Iran. Along with public discourse that now centered on key terms such as democracy, pluralism and modernity (Abrahamian 2008), the Khatami government resumed[11] Rafsanjani's liberal economic policies that aimed to incorporate the Islamic Republic into the international market economy. A new five-year plan aimed at the period from 2000-2004 called for economic reconstruction comprised of an ambitious program to privatize several major industries and to reduce subsidies for basic commodities (Siddiqi 2005).[12]

The presidency of Ahmadinejad in 2005 once again brought back the Revolution's populist and conservative politics to the table. Indeed, Ahmadinejad won on the double platform of reinforcing Iran's national security and executing the populist promises of the Revolutionary era as a *mostazafin* champion by placing Iran's oil wealth on dinner tables (Abrahamian 2006). To this end, unlike preceding governments the Ahmadinejad administration rejected reform proposals by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, increased cash handouts to the population and supported large-scale state subsidies for food and gasoline. However, rising inflation rates led the Ahmadinejad government to embark – in December 2011 – on a subsidies reform plan. Under the targeted subsidies plan, "all subsidies [were] to be gradually removed during a five-year period",[13] with all subsidies eventually phased out by 2015. The cuts encompassed key consumer goods including gasoline, natural gas, electricity and food, and were "in line with recommendations from global financial organizations which advised Iran to get rid of a heavily subsdized economy if it [wanted] to boost its economic power."[14]

Globalization theorists have emphasized that poor urban groups in developing countries have found themselves further economically marginalized as a result of these precise structural adjustment programs that moved them from low-productivity jobs to unemployment (Stiglitz 2002). From this perspective, the 55 percent of urban individuals now living under the poverty line in Iran largely reflect a global system that emphasizes

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[11] Pro-market reforms were put on hold during the second Rafsanjani administration (1994-1997) because of a balance of payments crisis (see Salehi-Isfahani 2006).

[12] The Iranian Parliament, Majlis, approved the five-year plan in 1999. The plan also called for the creation of 750,000 jobs/year. However, only 300,000 jobs were created in 2000. See Middle East Economic Digest, "Khatami's Second Chance," 22 June 2001: http://www.payk.net/mailingLists/iran-news/html/2001/msg00343.html. Khatami, however, succeeded in liberalizing the foreign exchange market, lowering trade barriers, reducing government control of credit markets and allowing private banks to operate. However, privatization efforts were slow and by 2005, the economy was still dominated by the public sector (Salehi-Isfahani 2006).

[13] Fars News Agency, "Ahmadinejad Praises Iran's Subsidy Reforms Plan", 5 May 2012: http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9102111459 .

[14] Ibid.

liberalization in developing countries irrespective of whether or not they have the investment environment to create sustained growth.

While globalization theory helps to explain the macro-economic setting that has contributed to the absolute poverty rates we find in Iran today, it provides less obvious answers for what happens once economic marginalization, unemployment and deinstitutionalization occur. Those who defend global capitalism argue that while improvement may come more quickly for some than for others, the benefits of economic growth will eventually trickle down to poor individuals so that everyone will ultimately come to be better off (Norberg 2007). In the interim, proponents see social development in the form of NGOs and emergency aid as a viable solution for easing the effects of marginalization and preventing possible future unrest among poor urban groups in the Middle East and other parts of the developing world (see Bayat 2004; Vekemans and Giusti 1970). However, embedded in these efforts to improve the well-being of the urban poor lies an unstated assumption – remnants of Oscar Lewis' culture of poverty theory (1966) – that the cultural, social and economic isolation of the poor inhibits their ability for self-help, which in turn requires the intervention of outside agencies (Richard and Roberts 1998). The fatalism, hopelessness and seeming disorganization of the urban poor, who are thought to survive on the socio-economic margins of their communities, has become a reference point in analyses of urban poverty and its solution. A representative example are the comments of one NGO worker in Tehran who stated how the NGO had succeeded to "raise the aspirations" of its young, poor clients. "The kids now want to get to a good place, find a decent job. We've raised their aspirations", she stated proudly.[15] Not denying the positive role that many NGOs play in poor communities, the social development perspective does little to tell us why there are poor individuals who have managed – on their own – to espouse relatively high hopes for their futures and a hard work ethic, and who have created – again on their own – their own forms of social order and organization within their communities.

In the wake of findings that have suggested the serious empirical weaknesses of the "culture of poverty" thesis,[16] a spate of scholarly research has arisen whose major aim has been to identify the activities that poor urban groups in developing countries have espoused as a result of their unwilling integration into the global market economy (Eckstein 1977; Li 2005; Piven and Cloward 1979; Portes, Castells and Benton 1989; Scheper-Hughes 1993; Scott 1985). In the last half of the twentieth century, these studies became all the more relevant in the context of the Middle East, where the transition to modern markets led to a drop in formal employment from five to 15 percent (Bayat 2010). High unemployment rates coupled with large numbers of impoverished rural-urban migrants led to concern as to whether or not this new urban poor would comprise a destabilizing force in the region (Bayat 2010). The Iranian Revolution, the rise of Hezbollah, and the pro-poor discourse of radical Islamist groups in the Middle East only helped to intensify this concern. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing to the present day, addressing this concern has become the major preoccupation of a multidisciplinary body of political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists, all of whom have analyzed

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[15] This NGO provided education (including the arts and languages) and psycho-social assistance for child laborers in Tehran.

[16] The culture of poverty thesis has been challenged for quite some time (Coward, Feagin and Williams 1973; Hannerz 1969; Irelan, Moles and O'Shea 1969; Valentine 1968; Wilson 1987).

the practices of the Middle Eastern poor to determine whether they threaten (Boudarbat and Ajbilou 2007; Hafez 2006[17]; Munoz 2000; Richards 2003) or preserve (Bayat 1998; Hoodfar 1997; MacLeod 1991; Singerman 1995; Wikan 1985) the existing social order.

Those who argue that the Middle Eastern poor constitute a threat assume that there is a mismatch between rising expectations and the structural conditions necessary to realize them including the lack of higher education, meaningful social connections, gainful employment, and effective socio-economic participation. This is thought to create frustration and lead to a worldview that makes violence and radicalism an increasingly attractive offer for the region's poor (Kashan 2003, Kouaouci 2004). In this perspective, conditions of poverty become the provocations that produce leveled aspirations, passive coping strategies and a limited worldview, which in turn are argued to lead to intolerable frustration and to a violence-prone disposition. More recently, scholars have suggested that the intersection of age with these other areas of disadvantage detaches poor Middle Eastern youth from social relations and institutions and prevents them from fully participating in the normatively prescribed activities for their age groups (see, for instance, Salehi-Isfahani 2008). Their inability to socialize with peers through shared consumption practices, to establish independent households and to meet the rising costs of marriage all contribute to feelings of despair, hopelessness and alienation. As a result, these young people can become a potential resource for radical religious groups because having no constructive outlet for their frustrations, they will tend to develop their own forms of solidarity for improving their lives and this might come at the expense of society.

This approach has had its critics, most notably those who have shown that it is often the educated middle classes in the Middle East, rather than the urban poor, who are mobilized to join political Islamist groups (see, for instance, Krueger 2007). A majority of the Middle Eastern poor, these scholars suggest, use a rational choice calculus instead of emotionally driven behavior, to effect change. Working within James Scott's everyday resistance model, these scholars have relied on ethnographic methods to highlight the ways that poor Middle Eastern men and women advance their own power while simultaneously maintaining, rather than threatening, the existing social order (Bayat 1998, Hoodfar 1997, MacLeod 1991, Singerman 1995).

One of the earliest examples of this perspective is Singerman's (1995) study of Cairo's shaabi (popular class) neighborhoods. For Singerman, informal activities such as participating in extended kinship networks and savings associations, and engaging in street vending provide low-income city residents with control over social and economic resources that enable them to promote their individual preferences within their families and communities. In this context, poverty does not nurture anomie, despair and violence but rather gives rise to localized forms of rational struggle that aim to enhance the poor's own socio-economic interests. Informal economic activity creates control over resources, which in turn provides an opening for low-income city residents – who feel that their interests are being overlooked by the state – to accomplish economic objectives outside of state control. Thus, the growth of the informal economy in countries such as Egypt has not only led to the social and economic mobility of its members, but also to the erosion of the state's economic pre-eminence and the weakening of its control of the broader

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[17] Hafez (2006) has argued that besides being young and Muslim, suicide bombers come from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds (poor, middle class and affluent).

political economy of the nation. Informality, then, becomes a sphere of rational manipulability by low-income groups in order to develop and enhance their political and economic power to survive and thrive.

More recently, Bayat (1998, 2003, 2008, 2010) has built off this resistance literature to argue that the urban poor in Iran engage in a silent, individualistic "encroachment on public goods and the power and property of elite groups" (Bayat 2008). Rather than the deliberate political acts of everyday resistance, these quiet, illegal advancements are not intended to overturn state power. According to Bayat, the poor use strategies – such as street hawking, setting up vending sites without the permission of the city municipality or selling illicit goods – to what they want and live a dignified life. In the process, they indirectly redistribute social goods and opportunities from the more wealthy segments of Iranian society – such as established merchants and formal institutions – to themselves.[18]

The question becomes, then, how to reconcile these perspectives with the fact that many poor individuals in Iran are 1) engaged in some type of socio-economic activity to improve their lives and 2) undertake activities that cannot be termed as encroachments on the power or property of elite groups, but that do serve as strategies for improving their life chances. Where do the concepts of quiet encroachment and everyday resistance leave room for those individuals who are not propelled to take on intentional acts of resistance or engage in non-deliberate illegal behaviors? Preoccupation with bringing poor Middle Eastern groups out of the margins by focusing on their daily political activism in response to the new global economic restructuring, while granting agency to individuals who have been considered passive, fatalistic and hopeless, has also led to a tendency among scholars to overlook the widely diverse ways that the poor in the Middle East respond to poverty and attempt to move forward.

The perspectives that have dominated thus far cannot explain the variety of responses that may provide greater economic benefits and that do not neatly correspond to how we think the Middle Eastern poor should behave in response to the increased marginalization they find themselves in. These responses include tendencies to keep to their own neighborhoods, to refuse job offers and to not engage in illegal activities. Other motivations then, besides solely appropriating social goods and opportunities, must be at work. Rather than focus on how larger economic forces affect the poor's political struggles, we can reach a more comprehensive picture of poverty in the Islamic Republic – and perhaps in the greater Middle East – by examining how individual orientations and aspirations drive action among the young urban poor.

THE STUDY

This dissertation uses ethnographic research methodology to demonstrate how poor youth in Iran manage to not simply survive, but to become mobile given their limited opportunities. My primary objective is to provide an understanding of these young people's motivations and aspirations, and how conditions associated with poverty affect the strategies that they use to attain their goals.

In providing this understanding, I conducted two years of ethnographic fieldwork in two urban capitals: the provincial capital of Sari located in Mazandaran province and

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[18] Rather than redistribute social goods and opportunities from the wealthy to the poor, it appears that the poor simply use what has been made available to them by the structure of the local economy.

the national capital of Tehran. I chose the two cities because they differ substantially in size and in economies, are located in two different environmental zones, and have distinct urban configurations. The first, Tehran, is the national capital, the heart of Iran's industries, and the 21st largest city in the world. Rural-urban migration and immigration to Tehran have created a large urban poor youth population composed of native Iranians, Dom Gypsies[19] and Afghan refugees whose experiences are shaped by spatial dynamics not present in provincial cities. Indeed, there is a distinct geographical divide by class lines in Tehran, with the majority of Tehran's poor concentrated in the southern districts of the capital. Middle classes occupy the middle segments of the city and upper classes reside in the north. Alternatively, the second capital, Sari, is host to a well-integrated[20] poor urban youth population – similarly comprised of native Iranians,[21] Dom Gypsies and Afghan refugees – that is not cordoned ecologically according to class. As a result, the poor interact with the rich on a daily basis in various community institutions including bazaars, mosques, and local shops and centers. The presence of divergent urban configurations in Sari and Tehran thus provides an ideal comparative axis for assessing the effect of social-structural contexts on poor youths' perceptions of the opportunities and incentives available to them[22].

Gaining access to these youth, let alone getting to know them, was not easy. I explored many strategies, the most effective of which was going through local contacts who vouched for my trustworthiness and moral character among their low-income acquaintances. I found that serving as a volunteer English teacher to these referrals was often the best way to gain trust and engage in close observations of private spaces and interactions with family, friends and community members. I supplemented my teaching activities by spending time in local sites where sizeable numbers of poor youth worked or

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[19] Dom Gypsies are an Indo-Aryan ethnic group who originated from India and now reside mainly in the Middle East and North Africa (Williams 2000).

[20] In traditional Iranian cities, both the rich and poor lived in the same neighborhood and at times even next door to each other because the kin structure obligated the more fortunate family members to support the less fortunate in the family. This prevented any dishonor that might have arisen from the poverty of a close relative (see Kherrabadi 1991 and also Chapter 4 of this dissertation). Despite the recent construction of apartment complexes, highways and wide avenues, Sari has retained its "traditional" city fabric, as evidenced by the near absence of social class segregation in many of its neighborhoods. Alternatively, in Tehran, construction efforts under the Shah led to the creation of a "new city" fabric in the capital, which was characterized by sprawling wide avenues, Western-style houses and apartment complexes as well as the geographic division of social classes.

[21] Note that while individuals from Mazandaran province are ethnically Mazandaranis while those from Tehran are ethnically Persian, I refer to both groups as native Iranians. Unlike the gypsies and Afghans, individuals from these provinces are all indigenous Iranians and therefore, do not experience major differences in mobility experiences.

[22] Ethnic Iranians, Dom Gypsies and Afghan and Iraqi refugees also characterized the ethnic populations of both Sari and Tehran. While I also came to know many gypsies and refugees in the course of my fieldwork, I ultimately decided to leave the present analysis to a comparison between ethnic Iranian youth in Tehran and ethnic Iranian youth in Sari, since ethnicity would introduce yet another variable into the analysis.

frequented including bazaars, salons, parks, and mosques.[23] As I established my legitimacy as a trusted member of the community in each site, I created rapport with specific poor youth, thereby enabling me to hang out and engage in conversations with them.

By using these multiple paths to find and interact with a diverse sample of poor urban youth, I was able to observe a cross-section of poor young men and women as possible. I made my way from one group of poor youth to another, seeking to position myself in a way to learn as much as possible about the mechanisms[24] involved in their attempts to get ahead. I often shared meals and endless cups of hot tea with the youth and their families, I walked with them as they went about their daily errands, and I discussed various issues with them. I listened to young men and women as they joked, worried and formulated strategies to deal with school, money, recreational activities, employment, friendships and relationships. I observed the environments in which they lived, ate, and interacted with community members, with neighbors, with parents and with siblings. I listened to them as they talk about their desires, hopes, dreams and expectations.

To be able to navigate within Iran's maze of cultural nuances, bureaucracy and social life takes a great deal of perseverance. My own background as an Iranian greatly facilitated this process. My shared identity and language with my informants and my own experiences growing up in the country helped me to gain acceptance and trust within communities. It further enabled me to be sensitive to cultural cues embedded within my informants' behaviors that made the data analysis easier. At the same time, however, the fact that I was an Iranian female also prevented me from being privy to certain conversations and from gaining access to certain sites that someone not from my background may have been able to observe. Nevertheless, I believe that my attempts to reach as broad a cross section of poor youth as possible enabled me to present findings that objectively addressed the central questions of this research study.

In addition to my observations, the answers and comments that youth provided to my questions about their dreams and hopes helped me to gain a deeper sense of how they understood their present conditions. Several young women in Sari who were living in the economic conditions of the youth that I was studying, provided research assistance by occasionally accompanying me to various sites in the city, initiating conversations with poor youth in the community and conducting informal interviews with poor young men and women in communities that I could not access due to safety concerns. My assistants' ease with navigating the city and striking up conversations with local youth facilitated my entrée into local networks and provided me with access to neighborhoods that I otherwise could not have safely entered on my own. Their observations of community members

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[23] I also occasionally helped out as a volunteer for various NGOs (mostly in Tehran). Although this method limited my ability to move around particular sites, it facilitated my access to particularly remote and dangerous sites in the national capital by signaling my institutional authority to residents.

[24] I use the term "mechanism" in this study to refer to the pathways that connect a particular cause to an outcome or effect. In this sense, mechanisms can be seen as the social "cogs and wheels" that bring the relationship between two events into existence (Elster 1989 as cited by Hedstrom and Swedberg 1998. Hedstrom and Swedberg (1998) provide one of the most comprehensive analyses of the mechanism-based approach to social theory.

further proved to be invaluable, as they enabled me to verify the validity of general trends that I was observing in my own data.

As it was neither practical nor advisable to always carry a notebook and take notes while in the field, I often resorted to typing detailed systematic notes of observations, interactions, and conversations at the conclusion of each day's fieldwork. I developed a coding system for my fieldnotes that aided in analyzing general trends and patterns of behavior and thought that were directly related to my research questions. All of the narrative examples and quotes that I use in the text are representative of these wider patterns.[25]

THIS STUDY'S APPROACH

To the extent that we wish to understand how conditions of increased poverty affect poor young people's behaviors in Iran, we cannot overlook that there are many poor youth in the country who do the opposite of what current theoretical approaches expect them to do. This is particularly important because, as I came to discover from my years of fieldwork, young people in Iran adopt diverse strategies for dealing with poverty and getting what they want. Theories of emotion-driven behavior, resistance and quiet encroachment provide little theoretical and empirical leverage in understanding the mechanisms involved in leading these youth to adopt the decisions they do.

Scholars in these perspectives may see interactions and behaviors and hear personal accounts, but can only conjecture as to how these are linked to globalization and market reform. Poor people in the Middle East, so these scholars infer, are aware that they have become increasingly excluded under the new global restructuring and so resist its effects by joining radical groups, reasserting their power within extended family networks, or maximizing their wealth by engaging in petty illegal practices. The problem is that if we assume that any of these arguments are correct, then we should expect that all poor people in Iran would adopt similar practices in response to similar macroeconomic conditions. However, there are patterned differences in the ways that people in the country think and react to their social worlds. Current theoretical perspectives, due to their exclusive focus on the poor's reactive acts of political agency, cannot provide explanations of how values like responsibility, familial loyalty and spirituality inform how poor individuals move in their pursuits. However, the simple fact is that poor people in Iran make choices about their lives, and these choices are the result of different sets of motivators that influence their behaviors.

For instance, understanding the behaviors of poor youth in Iran through accounts of emotional-driven action cannot explain the fact that the groups of poor youth who are members of Iran's paramilitary militia, Basiij, do not join because they want to head off their intolerable frustration. Rather, they join because they want to ensure future socio-economic gains that would help them realize their rather lofty aspirations. The emotional-action paradigm is the result of a misunderstanding of the values and aspirations among these groups of youth more generally. Alternatively, resistance theory and its focus on the poor's rational choice calculus cannot explain why some poor youth in Iran engage in seemingly irrational acts such as refusing to leave communities that offer limited socio-economic mobility opportunities. Finally, attempting to understand the behaviors of poor

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[25] Furthermore, all quotes in the dissertation are my own translation of the original Persian to English.

young individuals in Iran through quiet encroachment theory cannot help us come to terms with the fact that there are youth who do not engage in trivial illegal behaviors that would help them realize their aspirations and improve their lot in life. As I will show throughout this dissertation, poor young people in the Islamic Republic are engaged in a variety of struggles to improve their life chances that arise from different sets of motivations; they do not simply arise as a response to the modernizing economic system. As such, while critical explanations of globalization and structural adjustment can help us understand the widespread migration of rural migrants to large urban centers in Iran and the increased tendency among these new groups of urban poor to rely on themselves rather than on the state for survival and advancement, they only provide a partial picture of low-income life in Iran, for they cannot explain the behavioral variations that exist.

I argue that a better way to understand the dynamics of poverty among urban poor youth in Iran is to take the role of culture more seriously. Rather than demonstrate how the struggles of poor youth are a reflection of their agency, I choose, as a starting point, the fact that these individuals are already engaged in meaningful actions to pursue their ideas of the good life. This allows us to shift the terms of the debate from the question of whether or not they are actors to the question of the *mechanisms* involved in shaping their particular choices and decisions.

To understand the determinants of poor youth's choices in Iran, the present study employs an explanatory framework that incorporates cultural-based explanations, at the same time focusing on the role of social structural factors. Until recently, social scientists have been hesitant to examine the link between culture and poverty. Ever since the publication of Lewis's (1959) work that demonstrated how capitalist institutions fostered the development of a worldview particular to the poor, any cultural based explanations of poverty have been viewed as "blaming the victim" for their deprived economic conditions. Frequently, scholars see cultural explanations of poverty to be in direct contradiction with structural explanations. Even recent sociological attempts[26] to bring culture back to discussions on poverty have approached "culture" as providing the tools for action, and neglect the more classical concern with motives for action (see Vaisey 2010). Here again, the primary reason seems to be a deliberate aversion to examining how motivations based on values and belief systems – or more simply, how people's evaluations of their social worlds – play a role in sustaining and perpetuating disadvantage. In this view, the individual's values, attitudes and beliefs are not as strong predictors of conduct as are his/her surrounding social institutions or his own repertoire of skills and knowledge (Swidler 1986). However, as recent social science research has shown (Azjen 2001; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008; Vaisey 2010), there exists much evidence to indicate that what people believe and want also play significant roles in shaping their behaviors.

Rather than reject "toolkit" potential contributions toward explaining poverty's influence on individual behaviors of poverty by wholly accept the values approach, I move toward a synthesis of the three approaches in this study. Thus, I use the term culture to refer to three interrelated elements: what people believe (their moral and value systems), what they want (their aspirations) and what they do (their strategies of action). I

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[26] Many of these studies follow Swidler's (1986, 2001) toolkits approach to culture and view it as an individual's strategies of action, repertoire or skills set (see, for instance, Lamont 1992; Lamont and Small 2008; Laureau 2003; Young 2004; Harding 2010).

demonstrate how poor young people's moral systems and associated values – along with their subjective perceptions of their social positioning – influence what they find worthy of pursuing, such as whether they want to be an upstanding citizen or have a decent job. I show that while these wants are not much different from the desires of the Iranian middle class, the ends that each group sees as salient for pursuit are key for explaining differences in outcomes between the two classes. I discuss how the various resources or tools that poor youth bring to the table such as their networks, street smarts and risk-taking abilities further shape how successful they are in realizing these wants. Finally, in a reversal of traditional thinking about fatalism,[27] I demonstrate how beliefs in divine determinism operate not to breed passivity, but to increase economic effort.

This approach to culture provides space for identifying how the interaction of morals, values and aspirations with factors including familial ethos, geography and social networks can influence a wide range of choices and strategies among the region's young and poor.[28] Furthermore, unlike dominant perspectives that have been used to study the Middle Eastern poor, this approach allows for intra-group diversity within a society experiencing similar macro-economic constraints. The beliefs, interactions and wants of the poor do not need to be the same and thus, their choices may also vary (Kuran 2004).

OVERVIEW

In the following chapters, I draw from two years of systematic observations of poor Iranian youth to show the life these individuals have carved for themselves under conditions of poverty. My intention is to go beyond surface observations to understand the factors involved in leading them to make certain choices and not others. By relaying the experiences of Iran's poor youth, I also attempt to go beyond Iran's borders and its unique religious, political and social milieu to contribute to a new understanding on the nature of poverty, culture and prospects for development in Middle Eastern societies more generally.

The analysis presented in this study begins, in Chapter 2, by examining the two moral systems of honor and of the Muslim work ethic, which poor young men and women in Sari and Tehran adopt. It demonstrates how these moral codes lead to a set of associated values that provide both guidelines and an evaluative code for conduct. By suggesting that culturally shaped moral systems can be a possible explanation for the "what, when, where and how" of individual action, the chapter synthesizes a values approach to culture with a toolkits approaches (e.g. Swidler 1986) to explain patterned differences in behavior among the urban poor. Chapter 3 builds on the second chapter by examining how the moral codes of honor and work, once operative, shape poor youths' aspirations. It shows that ideas concerning the good life among the young people in this study can only be understood within the context of the interrelationship between their values, their subjective perceptions and the structures that impact the objective opportunities they encounter. Chapter 4 looks at how poor youth transform their ideas of the good life into strategies to escape poverty. It provides evidence that individual

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[27] See Acevedo (2008) for a full review of the literature on fatalism.

[28] My explanatory framework draws on the work of Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) and Vaisey (2009) in finding that cultural values and beliefs serve as both motivations in shaping behavior as well as rationalizations that help make sense of the choices they do make. An in-depth discussion of the similarities and differences of my approach to current cultural analyses of urban poverty can be found in Chapter 5, where I lay out the book's formal theoretical proposition.

initiative must be placed within the context of the social and economic resources that the poor youth can bring into their quest for mobility. The study concludes with a discussion of the theoretical implications that emerge from the empirical dynamics of poverty among poor young people in Sari and Tehran.

CHAPTER 2

CODES OF HONOR AND WORK

        To understand the aspirations of poor youth and the strategies they use to pursue
them, it is important to first address the question of what particular set of morals they
adopt that help them to interpret, guide and direct their lives. This question has attracted
considerable attention among scholars interested in the intersection of culture and urban
poverty and has generated three schools of thought concerning the norms and values
governing lower-class life. The first, which forms the core of conservative explanations
about the persistence of poverty in urban areas, argues that sustained material deprivation
leads the poor to develop a set of local moral standards that are not sanctioned by
mainstream society (Banfield 1958; Lewis 1966; Moynihan 1966). By this account, poor
youth under-perform in arenas such as education and employment because they do not
value conventional principles of education or hard work (Fordham and Ogbu 1986;
MacLeod 1986; Massey and Denton 1993). The second common conception, espoused
by structuralists, argues that the poor are, in fact, accepting of moral standards such as
hard work and responsibility that are viewed as morally right by contemporary society as
a whole (Cook and Ludwig 1998; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Newman 1999; Smith 2007).
In this view, individuals are kept poor when these "right" values undermine their well
being as soon as they're practiced under difficult circumstances[29] or when
macrostructural forces such as inadequate social service provisioning or school support
prohibits them from experiencing upward mobility. Finally, a third group of studies
argues that both mainstream and heterodox value orientations are present among the
urban poor and that the individual's life circumstances largely dictate which orientation
he will espouse (Anderson 1999; Hannerz 1969; Suttles 1970). For instance, despair can

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[29] In her study of job-seeking among poor black men and women, Smith (2007) found that they
believe in conventional values of individualism and personal responsibility. However, a strong
belief in individualism prohibited some from using their networks precisely because
individualism dictated that people should rely on themselves, rather than on others, for success.

lead the poor individual who abides by "middle-class values" to espouse an oppositional culture whose norms are "consciously opposed to those of mainstream society" (Anderson 1998: 80).

The weakness of all these approaches, however, is its simplification. By reducing an analysis of morals and values to those that mainstream society does and does not endorse, all three conceptions are vulnerable to underestimating the possibility that the values of the poor can be adaptations of mainstream values whose structure constitutes a separate orientation, but that are not conceptual deviations from that of the mainstream. Various codes – regardless of how they are viewed by others in moral terms – help poor individuals negotiate conditions of economic deprivation and provide a meaningful life for themselves under those circumstances.

This chapter addresses the question of morals and values by arguing that the moral code of honor and the Muslim work ethic structure everyday life among poor Iranian youth and provide the foundation for a set of values that help them to make sense of their social worlds. Although the non-poor in Iranian society also shares these codes, the poor are particularly committed to the Muslim work ethic and especially vulnerable to affronts to their honor precisely because they have less material ability to conceal shortcomings. Indeed, the poor only have their honor, rather than material goods to focus on. As such, they develop a set of values about a number of life experiences that define what being honorable and dedicated to work means. These not only provide guidelines for moral conduct, but also comprise an evaluative code for individual assessments of who is dishonorable and lazy and who is not. While readers may notice similarities between these ethical codes and those held by other socio-economic groups, poor young Iranians themselves construct these values and norms without reference to the prevailing moral order outside poverty.[30]

In subsequent chapters, I will demonstrate how these moral codes provide a blueprint for poor youths' aspirations, which then serve as motivations for action. The concept of culture that I adopt in this study thus synthesizes the "old" Parsonian notion of culture as values (Kluckhohn 1951; Parson and Shils 1951) with the "new" culture as practices paradigm (DiMaggio 1997; Harding 2010; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Small 2008; Mills 1940; Swidler 1986, 2001) to empirically demonstrate that conditions of economic deprivation among poor youth have associated ethical codes that not only shape these young people's motives or aspirations, but that also shape the "what, when, where and how" of their actions. As such, beginning with this chapter, this study provides further empirical evidence for recent efforts in cultural sociology to integrate "old" values approaches to culture and poverty with "new" toolkits approaches in order to explain patterned differences in behavior among the urban poor (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008 and Vaisey 2010).[31]

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[30] This finding is similar to that of Sanchez-Jankowski (2008). Sanchez-Jankowski found that the poor adopt either a security-maximizing or excitement-maximizing value orientation that developed without regard to the dominant moral position of mainstream society.

[31] Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) spearheaded this movement by using empirical ethonographic evidence to argue that the subculture of scarcity among the urban poor in the United States is composed of a worldview and associated values that help shape the interests of the poor and provide a cultural toolkit for action. Vaisey (2010) builds off of Sanchez-Jankowski's argument and empirically demonstrates that the educational aspirations of poor youth are different from

MORAL SYSTEMS: HONOR AND WORK

Morals are the standards of "good" and "bad" that not only help to guide and give meaning to life, but to also shape an individual's character and conduct. There are two ethical systems or codes that dominate everyday life among poor young men and women in Sari and Tehran (I define codes as a flexible set of expectations about "what one should do and how one will be evaluated" rather than as a solid and unchanging body of rules[32]): that of honor and that of work, which finds its origins in Islam. While some have viewed the code of honor as a derivative of the religion of Islam (see, for instance, Patai 1973), honor is not isomorphic to the religion and, in fact, can thrive in societies that do not embrace Islam, as countless ethnographies of the Americas, the Mediterranean, sub-Saharan Africa, Hindu India and East Asia have demonstrated (Gibson 1994; Dumont 1970; Horowitz 1983; Peristiany 1966; Sanchez-Jankowski 1998; Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002). The code of honor is performative and is concerned with the safeguarding of personal and family honor or *aberou* from public judgment. In this context, being judged as honorable (*aberou-mand*) is considered good, while being evaluated as *bi-aberou* or dishonorable is considered bad. The second code, associated with work, is instrumental.[33] This code stresses work as a type of divine calling and is, in many ways, similar to the achievement ideology that has been associated with the Protestant work ethic.[34] As viewed by the youth in my study, in the Islamic moral system, God rewards those who are hard working and responsible. Poor youth in both cities try to live according to both codes, but structural variables – including one's age and work status – dictate which moral system will be more prominent at that particular moment in the youth's lifecourse. The following sections examine the specific characteristics and associated conventions guiding these two moral systems and describe how they provide a set of principles by which poor youth in both cities orient their everyday lives.

Honor

The honor code, as a moral system, is not specific to Iran. Rather, scholars have viewed it as a defining feature of the entire circum-Mediterranean region (see Gregg 2010). Furthermore, while studies have tended to adopt the view that the code of honor provides a rigid moral compass that guides conduct among peoples of the Middle East,[35]

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those of the non-poor and are predictive of their educational outcomes years later. However, while Vaisey subsumes the concepts of "values" and "aspirations" under "motivations", I see aspirations as indicative of an individual's attitudes towards life and shaped, in the first instance, by his values (which I defined as the individual's notions of what should and should not happen).

[32] In so doing, I adopt Horowitz's (1983) definition of codes (see Horowitz 1983: 21).

[33] These two moral codes are similar to the honor and achievement moral codes that Horowitz found among young Chicanos in the United States. However, as will be seen, the characteristics of the honor and achievement codes in Iranian society take a slightly different form than their U.S. counterparts.

[34] Readers may note many similarities between these two moral systems and the moral codes of honor and achievement espoused by the U.S. Chicano community identified by Horowitz (1983). However, while she finds that the codes of honor and achievement apply separately to different social settings, I found that honor and the work ethic are closely intertwined in function and structure social relations in the same setting (more on this later in the chapter).

[35] Abou-Zeid's (1966) classic account of honor in Egyptian Bedouin society provides a good example. Here, he views honor as a solid and unchanging body of values.

this notion largely misinterprets the nature and role of the code in varying cultural contexts. In Iran, for instance, not only are their differences in the content of honor between males and females, rich and poor, and young and old, but also honor or *aberou*[36] consists of a very public set of subjective evaluative criteria, which by its very nature, is flexible and often, vague.

There are two ways in which honor[37] is bestowed upon the individual in Iran: at birth and through one's family line. In the first manner, God bequeaths honor or *aberou* upon the individual at birth, the equivalent of a life-long gift from God. However, also implied in the Iranian code of honor is the concept of *asliyat* (ancestry/origin/purity).[38] Not only is one bequeathed honor by God when he is born, but he is also the recipient of his family's bloodline and the moral character that is passed on through this line. Thus, he is deemed as noble or pure of origin (*aseel*) who is born into a noble or pure (*aseel*) family. The noble (*aseel*) individual is the one who has received *aberou* in its entirety at birth. Alternatively, those whose family bloodlines are less than illustrious will have diminished their honor at birth. Unlike respect or power, Iranians thus cannot work to attain honor, as has been the dominant view among scholars of the Middle East.[39] Rather, they can only lose it. As such, *aberou* is finite and must be vigorously guarded against permanent loss by all with whom one has social or economic relations. As such, both the rich and the poor are morally bound to constantly safeguard their *aberou* from intimations or public accusations of dishonor. The poor however, are less able to conceal shortcomings before the public gaze, thus making their honor more susceptible to attack (Bayat 1997).[40]

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[36] The Persian language has many words to describe honor, which attests to its significance in Iranian culture. The following are some of the most common. *Aberou* is the most widely used and corresponds most closely to global understandings of honor as one's reputation or dignity. *Ghorur* is pride based on one's honor. *Ezzat* or *ezzate nafs* is the type of honor linked to one's ability to demonstrate kindness and generosity. *Sharaf* refers to the reputation that one (particularly, a man) holds for both himself and his family while *namus* refers to the sexual honor of women and their families. Women must protect their *namus* throughout their lives; doing otherwise would shame women and women's families.

[37] I follow Peristiany's (1966) definition of honor as the value of a person not only in his own eyes, but also (and more importantly) in the eyes of his local community.

[38] Abu-Lughod (1986) similarly found that the Awlad 'Ali (sons of Ali) Bedouins of the Western Desert of Egypt draw their honor from their *asl* (orgin/ancestry/nobility). Among the Awlad 'Ali, *asl* as one's bloodline, becomes the basis of moral differentiation between themselves and other tribes. In this view, those who cannot trace their genealogical connection to Ali (the Prophet's nephew) are of lesser moral worth. Similarly, in Iran, those who do not have a virtuous genealogical lineage (whether related to the Prophet or not) are considered to be of lesser moral worth in terms of *aberou* than those who do.

[39] The definition of honor in the West is often synonymous with the respect accorded to personal talent (see Sev'er and Yurkadel 2001). In this system, prestige is earned rather than bestowed and is thus sought after like a commodity. However, most studies of honor (both in the Middle East and elsewhere) have used honor and respect interchangeably and argue that one can gain or lose honor based on his actions (on this in the context of the Middle East, see, for instance, Abu-Lughod 1985 and Wikan 1984).

[40] In Chapter 2, I will discuss the difference between prestige and honor and describe how the main concerns of the rich lie in securing prestige rather than honor.

The honor system is anchored in face-to-face personal interactions and is dependent on a very public evaluation of one's value and that of his family's in the eyes of his society.[41] In the latter case, family-linked personal honor arises from the familial ethos,[42] which espouses the belief that one's own honor is a reflection of his family's *aberou*. Family-linked personal honor is reinforced and encouraged by close family ties. Cohesive kinship ties, in turn, are based on a system of mutual obligations: parents are expected to sacrifice and endure hardship for their children while children are obliged to take care of parents, respect their wishes, and maintain their parents' *aberou* by marrying "good" individuals and providing for them. This system of mutual exchanges both strengthens the family unit and serves as a public symbol of their unity. Being seen as a cohesive group secures the family's *aberou* – and by extension, the individual's *aberou* – within the community and provides the poor young person with a path to maintaining his image as an honorable (*aberou-mand*) individual. As such, poor youth stand to gain directly by striving to protect the integrity of their families before the public judgment. The views of Soheila are illustrative:

> *[Soheila's husband is addicted to prescription pills and is unemployed. Soheila wants her husband to appear good before the eyes of her peers].* "My only hope is for my husband to be good *[i.e. responsible, virtuous].* If my husband is good, then I'll be good, too…Whenever I go someplace, whenever I go to the mosque, I just pray for him. I [also] fast to make my prayers come true. I just do it [fast] for my husband *[Soheila means that she fasts so that her husband will be good].*"

Rather than being dependent on the acquisition of wealth and power, *aberou* is contingent on one's performative success in an evaluative sense. It is the person's actions, rather than his job or financial resources perse, that is the currency of *aberou*. If an individual acts honorably, he is not said to possess *aberou* (since he is simply maintaining it). Rather, he is judged to possess character (*shakhsiyat*), manhood (*gheyrat*) and/or nobility/goodness/pureness of origin (*asliyat*). Similarly, women are evaluated as being of character/of good origin (*ba isalat*), modest/pure (*najeeb*), and good (*khub*). However, if one acts dishonorably, he/she is said to have undergone *aberou-rizi* (shame/losing face). As such, when poor young men and women decide for or against a particular course of action, they consider whether the particular conduct will cause them to lose face, not whether it will result in *aberou*. It is *aberou-rizi* rather than *aberou* that thus becomes "part of the give and take of interactions (Wikan 1984: 638)."[43] For instance, one poor young woman in her late twenties recalled how she would fast when she was younger exclusively for the goal of saving face and not having the people around

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[41] Within honor cultures, it is the *public* recognition of one's honor that is salient. Indeed, the honor system requires an individual to be "constantly 'on show' [and] forever courting the public opinion of his 'equals', so that they may pronounce him worthy (Peristiany 1966: 11, 15).

[42] I borrow this term from Singerman (1995) who used it to describe the ethos of family units among the *sha'b* or popular sector in Egypt. Singerman (1995) defines the family ethos as the "rules or norms that are supported by the popular sector (10)."

[43] This finding empirically validates Wikan's (1984) claim that shame is "experience-near" while honor is "experience-distant" (Geertz 1976). Indeed, I found that *aberou-rizi* was the more salient concept among poor youth in Iran. That is, they tended to use *aberou-rizi* as a metric for behavior rather than *aberou*.

her think that she was a bad person. "[Even now], I don't want to do anything wrong and I don't want anyone to think that I do anything wrong", she stated.

The idea that honor is an issue that arises only among individuals in a person's own society is particularly salient for understanding how the personal qualities viewed as honorable (*aberou-mand*) vary with social context. Under the code of honor, a poor individual undergoes shame or *aberou-rizi* if he cannot act according to his community's expectations. One's community of social equals can further change depending on context. For instance, one poor young woman in Sari whose family was in particularly difficult financial straits saved face among her neighbors by presenting unexpected houseguests with fruit and pastries, which were the best that she could afford under the given circumstances. The same woman, when among another community of hers – that of her middle class peers – prevented *aberou-rizi* by dressing in trendy clothes in order to meet the expectations associated with this other "public". Finally, when on public streets, the young woman averted eye contact with men and took pains to act modestly in mixed-gender settings (such as inside shops and parks) in an effort to not compromise her honor and be judged as "*porou* (literally, with spirit, figuratively impolite/rude)" by individuals who may have recognized her. Taking care of elderly parents by working in a menial job in the informal sector, sacrificing one's own nutritional health in order to cover expenses for one's child, or participating in similar extra-curricular activities as one's middle-class peers were other means by which poor young men and women matched performance with expectation and thus, safeguarded their *aberou* in the eyes of social equals (here, family, friends and community). Indeed, the key to understanding *aberou* among poor young men and women is that it is only an issue among those who are perceived to be one's social or economic peers because they have the same set of expectations for each other and can thus theoretically compete with one another (Peristiany 1966). The preservation of *aberou* is not an issue before individuals who are far removed (socially and/or economically) from the poor young person's life. For instance, poor young men and women repeatedly made it clear that it was inappropriate for young women to be seen alone in public by their own community members, for to travel alone placed a woman's character in question and implied sexual misconduct.[44] "These things don't matter for the rich", stated one poor young woman in Sari whose mother permitted her to hang out in public alone or with friends. "Among my [extended] family, though, being seen alone [by them] is inappropriate." The case of Qasim, a 28-year-old informal laborer in south Tehran is further representative. Struggling to make ends meet to provide for his family and not losing face in front of his own brothers, Qasim would often "commit wrongdoing" in order to make his "life go round." However, while this was something he readily admitted to socio-economic unequals (including myself), he was reluctant to have anyone in his social circle know of his circumstances and misdeeds. As Qasim stated, "Don't mention my name. I have acquaintances here and it would be really bad *[meaning that his reputation would be called into question]* if they found out." Thus, the moral code of honor is not a homogenous and rigid set of rules, but rather a code that is applied differentially by the different groups in which one finds himself.

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[44] Bauer (1985) found a similar pattern among the lower classes in Iran. As Bauer states, the importance placed on women's movements in public is related to the *visibility* of public conduct and how it will be perceived by one's peers rather than its intrinsic (im)morality.

Aberou turns into *aberou-rizi* when a poor individual fails to live up to the expectations imposed on him by his community of equals. One can only undergo *aberou-rizi* if he fails to keep certain behaviors not sanctioned by the honor code from local assessments. As long as "close" others do not know of his transgressions and he is seen as innocent, there is no blow inflicted on his honor. However, the moment the young person's community finds out and he is judged as guilty, the poor youth suffers from critical opprobrium. However, rarely does one's community publicly shame the dishonorable individual. Indeed, the etiquettes associated with the honor code – namely that of *ta'arof* or ritual courtesy – inhibits communities from criticizing a non-intimate to his face, for then *their* honor would be smeared (more on this below). Rather, they sanction the dishonorable (*bi-aberou*) individual in more implicit and circuitous ways:[45] communities will gossip behind his back, which will result in the loss of his good reputation and lead to economic and social sanctions. Other members of the community will be less willing to form ties with him, leading to reduced business opportunities and thus, fewer chances for economic mobility. The individual will no longer be a good candidate for marriage, which will then lead to difficulties in forming his own household. Samira, a 20-year-old from a low-income family in Sari recounted the following:

> I had a boyfriend in high school *[the boyfriend was also from a low-income family]* and we were together for two years before he came to my family to ask for my hand in marriage. My family started to ask around about his character and they eventually found out that he wasn't a good person. They found out that he smoked cigarettes. People in the community also told my family that he was a drug addict. My father, brother and uncle all disapproved of the marriage and I couldn't really say anything above their word. He [Samira's boyfriend] would come to my school, trying to get me back and when I told my father, he forbade me from going to school for a year.

The mechanisms that the individual himself uses to save face and avert humiliation when his *aberou* is in jeopardy often preclude extreme situations as well. These defense mechanisms include dissimulation, placing blame on others, attributing failure to God's will, and explaining away others successes rather than one's own failures. Many poor youth use dissimulation through discourse to save face among colleagues, acquaintances, peers and/or kin. This includes withholding information about a husband or father's (low-status) job or lack thereof by stating that he is working in "*kare azad* (implying vaguely that he is a freelancer)" and concealing family misfortunes (drug use, financial ruin, separation) that would diminish a person's *aberou*. The case of Atefi is representative:

> Atefi is a poor, divorced 22-year-old who just started working in the bazaar in downtown Sari in order to meet expenses. An assistant to an old female clothing merchant, Atefi never told her employer that she was divorced, stating instead that she was married because "it's not appropriate for people here to find out."[46]

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[45] Bar (2004) and Wikan (1984) have all shown that shaming precludes public denunciations in Iran and Oman, respectively.

[46] It is expected that a woman stay married to her husband for the rest of her life. A divorced woman is looked down upon and brings shame to herself and her family. While a man can end his marriage without any reason and without the consent of his wife, there are only certain

Other poor youth lay blame for their own failures on others in an effort to avoid humiliation. Being seen alone in public does not reflect badly on the poor young woman, for instance, but on the "mental backwardness" of those who judge her.[47] Failing one's classes or going down the wrong path in life does not signal one's own lack of skill, laziness or misjudgment but the ineptitude of teachers and co-workers. Take the comments of 15-year-old Mehrshad from Sari and 28-year-old Mohammad Reza, a low-income stall vendor in Sari:

> *[Mehrshad]:* I failed math because my teachers were bad. They keep nagging the students. They'll tell us to fix our collars and then when we do it, they'll tell us to leave the classroom!

> *[Mohammad Reza]:* There are bad people here in the bazaar…Kids my age shouldn't become bazaaris….I've changed so much since coming here. You learn bad things….I try not to go down the wrong path, but it's not possible. Even if you try to be good, people force you to go down the wrong path.

Rationalizations for one's personal failure or those of his family are also couched in terms of the supernatural (see Barkow 1975). In this view, responsibility for failure is delegated to God's will. It is God's will (*khaste Khoda*) that one's husband went bankrupt, that one has to work in menial jobs, or that one has to delay marriage because he has not amassed enough money. Finally, poor youth save face by explaining away not their own failures, but the successes of their peers. So, for example, other youth are able to do well in school because they have the time to study since "their schools are closer to where they live."[48] Other young women are able to climb up the educational ladder because "they don't have the responsibility of a family[49]." Still others are able to provide for their families because they have money and are "*khosh chance* (lucky)."[50]

Alternatively, when poor young men and women demonstrate the honor-linked values (described below), they become entitled to the respect that validates the character (*shakhsiyat*), origin (*asliyat*) and goodness (*khubi*) associated with *aberou*. The ability to hold onto one's honor brings respect and this in itself brings various types of social and economic rewards, including an admired position within one's own family, greater connections to more influential others and better marriage prospects. These rewards, in turn, enhance one's reputation as an esteemed member of the community. In this way, avoiding dishonor (*aberou-rizi*) is a route, albeit indirect, to increasing one's socio-economic status and position. The preservation of one's *aberou* can thus be considered a resource that poor young men and women use to advance their claims to the socio-

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instances when the wife can file for divorce (which can take years to process) including failure of her husband to provide financial support for the family and failure to satisfy the wife sexually.

[47] Yas stated this when members of her paternal family expressed shock at seeing her in a local park with a friend (myself) without adult supervision.

[48] Comment made by a 16-year-old in Sari to justify his low grades in school.

[49] A young female salon apprentice in Sari stated this.

[50] Comment made by a 17-year-old informal laborer in Sari.

economic rewards that accrue to the honorable. Alternatively, no amount of wealth can bring social precedence in the absence of the moral virtues associated with *aberou*.

Honor-Linked Values

What precisely is the network of honor-linked values[51] among poor youth? There are three categories of virtues that I will now detail.

The first of these values is autonomy. Not being dependent on anyone (*motaje kasi*) implies that one has the resources to stand on one's own feet and not be in any kind of debt. Any person who is in debt cannot fully preserve his *aberou* before members of his community since he is in an inferior position. The value that poor youth place on independence is particularly important to understand because it is frequently used as a metric by which one's status in the community is measured and by which poor youth distinguish among themselves and other individuals in the lower classes. In this view, increased social standing comes by way of having increasing degrees of autonomy. More autonomy, in turn, is linked to having greater responsibilities. Earning one's own money and having the financial independence to provide for oneself and one's family are two of the more important arenas that indicate one's ability to act independently and make decisions on one's own. Failing in these areas not only results in a diminished social standing, but also leads to shame (*aberou-rizi*) because it puts the individual in a position of social and economic vulnerability by others. Thus, according to one poor 16-year-old woman in Sari, people are "willing to pay poor street musicians and entertainers because they are doing something and have a skill." Similarly, lower class people who "earn their money through hard work (such as cleaning and janitorial work)" are said to be better off than the morally bankrupt beggars who are "too lazy" to work and must rely on the economic beneficence of others in order to make ends meet. Even individuals who are legitimately entitled to social welfare services by the state and non-governmental organizations[52] opt to receive welfare benefits and resources in-house rather than have officials and social workers bring them these goods because "they don't want neighbors to find out that they are in need of help."[53]

The importance that poor youth place on autonomy is manifested in their decisions to be "*pokteh* (literally, cooked; figuratively, ready)" before marriage and to be able to provide for their own households. In the first instance, not being able to amass the necessary economic resources before marriage would diminish a young man's *aberou*, for he would be deemed incapable of being a responsible man – one who has the financial autonomy to provide for his family:

> *[17-year-old Hossein is an informal laborer in south Tehran. These comments were made in a conversation about the early marriage of a petty street vendor who works a few*

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[51] I use Sanchez-Jankowski's definition of values as the "shoulds and should nots that individuals internalize" (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008: 20).

[52] In both Sari and Tehran, a multitude of state-sponsored "NGOs" operate to provide assistance and relief to the poor. Criteria to qualify for aid range from living in extreme economic deprivation, being poor and a single mother, being poor and addicted to drugs, coming from an abusive home, to being a refugee.

[53] The president of an NGO in Sari made this comment. The NGO would publicize specific dates each month when NGO clients could come to the NGO to pick up school supplies, foodstuffs and other material goods.

blocks away from Hossein]. I think that 17-year-old who got married when he was 14 is really *bad bakht* [unfortunate]. The wife expects something from him, she didn't just come from nowhere. What if she asks him for a coat tomorrow? How is he going to pay for it? His breath still smells like milk *[a common phrase used in Iran, which means that the individual is still a child who is dependent on others and hasn't yet gained the independence to become someone for himself.]*

To be able to start up and provide for one's own marital household, in turn, is the ultimate manifestation of one's autonomy. The individual is now deemed by his society as independent, able to gain control over his own resources and no longer economically tied to the parental household. For a poor young mother and father, failure to provide for the well-being of their children would bring *aberou-rizi*. As such, poor parents go to great lengths to safeguard their children so that the family may be judged as *aberou*-mand before the public gaze. Such measures include sacrificing their own material needs in order to pay for goods for their children such as clothes, mobile phones and recreational activities. The views of Qasim are representative:

> My brothers, they are doing really well for themselves *[here Qasim means that they are able to meet the economic needs of their families].* One's employed at a bank! For me, I just want to guarantee my child's future so that *kam nayaram [judged by his brothers as not being able to provide for his children.]*

Contributing to the income of one's parental household also averts *aberou-rizi* because the household is then able to amass enough money to move forward and therefore not be dependent on the economic aid of others. One young man in Tehran, for instance, had to drop out of school in the 9th grade because he had to help his family meet household expenses. "We have to meet expenses each month [with the income we make]", he stated. "My hope is that *motaje kasi nabashim [we don't become (financially) dependent on anyone.]*

The second value associated with the honor code is purity. Purity can be divided into two components: moral and sexual. While respecting the wishes of elders, being responsible, being loyal to one's family, committing oneself to making money honestly (rather than by begging, stealing, hustling or prostitution) and avoiding drugs are primary traits that are embodied in moral purity, moral purity also entails associating with the righteous and avoiding the unrighteous. Staying far enough away from those who violate the primary traits of moral purity is important, for the young person can be shamed if he appears to be associated with the "wrong" crowd in any way. In one particular instance, Yas and I headed into District 12, one of the most crime-ridden neighborhoods in Sari. Residents of District 12 are renowned in Sari for dealing drugs, stealing and hustling. One doesn't go into District 12 unless he is a resident of the neighborhood or looking to get a good deal on illicit drugs (or, in my case, a researcher). We got out of the taxi and started to walk in a congregated area full of small store and shops. Yas immediately started to cover her face with her *hijab* (head covering), saying that everyone was looking at us. "People from other parts of the city – like our taxi driver – are going to start wondering what I'm doing here!" Yas was concerned that the taxi driver might know someone in her family or in her neighborhood, and tell them that Yas was hanging out in District 12, thereby bringing shame (*aberou-rizi*) to her and her family.

Sexual purity is largely the purview of young women and embodies an unwillingness not to be seen associating with non-mahram[54] males. Indeed, the character of a young woman is intertwined in the public's judgment of her cleanliness (i.e. her sexual purity). To be viewed as *kasif* or unclean inflicts not only a blow to the *aberou* of the young woman, but also to her family, for the sexual honor (*namus*) of the family largely lies in securing the modesty of its females. This is why poor families largely restrict the movements of young women in public spaces for fear that they would be deemed as "loose" women if they are seen with young men. Consider the comments of 16-year-old Yas, a young woman from a low-income family in Sari:

> A lot of poor families don't let their daughters go out alone. But my mom isn't like that. She trusts me. She knows that I won't be hanging out with boys.

While moral and sexual purity are values subsumed under the code of honor, they find part of their origins in the religion of Islam itself. For poor Iranian youth, being Muslim does not just mean that they believe in Islam, but that they live in an Islamic republic that weaves religion into daily life in ways that make poor youth continuously conscious of the divine. Most speech expressions that poor youth use – from farewells (*Khoda Hafiz* – may God keep you safe) to references to the future (*Insh'allah* – God willing) – all invoke the divine in some manner. While there are different degrees of mundane religious practice among poor young men and women – for instance, not all poor youth pray – Islam permeates their daily lives in many other ways: schools, mosques, the month-long Ramadan fast which is publicly observed, weddings, and funerals comprise only some of the many different contexts in which poor youth learn and practice the religion. This everyday inculcation of Islam, in turn, shapes individual motives for purity (Gregg 2005). As Gregg (2005) has theorized, and as my fieldwork demonstrates (see below), the need for purity may be counterpoised to the negative experience of the loss of one's control:

> [*Mahmoud is 15 years old and from a poor family in Sari*]: [I think that] cable TV pollutes the pure souls of youth like me. Why should a young person pollute their eyes with sin? The religion of Islam doesn't accept this….A young person who doesn't want others to play with his *aberou* can control his actions during this age. After he's grown up, he can't control his actions.

The idea that Islam instructs one to "control" his actions through propriety provides poor young people with a sought-after set of etiquettes that simultaneously function to maintain his *aberou*. In this role, Islam does not constitute a contrapuntal system of values to the honor code (Gregg 2005), but instead serves to reinforce it. The emphasis that the religion places on purity is further indicative of one arena where honor can turn into disgrace. One young woman from a low-income family in Sari, for instance, married a young man after a long period of courtship, which they described as a boyfriend-girlfriend relationship. Since it is technically *haram* or forbidden by Islamic

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[54] In Islam, a *mahram* is a family member with whom sexual intercourse and marriage would be considered incestuous. A *mahram* male includes one's father, father-in-law, grandfather, uncle, brother and nephew.

law to have extramarital relationships, the young woman's neighbors shunned her even after her marriage as she was no longer seen as a woman of honor.

Moral and sexual purity are seen to supersede autonomy in the hierarchy of social divisions among poor young men and women. That is, if a poor youth is in need of economic assistance and he is deemed as *pak* or pure, it is seen as acceptable to help him because he is deserving of aid. While the poor youth's *aberou* will be slightly diminished since he is dependent on the charity of others, he is still seen to occupy a higher social standing than the dependent, immoral, unclean youth since the latter will simply squander charity. For instance, a neighbor of a poor young man in Sari stated how it was okay to help the young man because his family was not into cigarettes, alcohol and drugs. They also "work hard to make a living and never stretch their hands out [i.e. beg] for help."

The third honor-linked value is appearance. Poor youth place a premium on their appearance, for one's honor is enacted in front of others. To this end, individuals strive to secure a particular self-image that is intended for the public. Posturing is the main method by which they do this. While posturing takes several forms, which I detail below, the purpose remains the same: to maintain one's *aberou* in the eyes of others and particularly in the eyes of those who may be in a position to elevate the young person's socio-economic standing. The focal point of honor here is thus not so much the poor young person's inner moral compass, as it is his public presentation in front of those with whom he has regular interactions (Eickelman 1976). Soheila, who we met earlier, was married to an unemployed man who was abusive and addicted to prescription pills:

> I don't want Elena [Soheila's good friend and landlord] or anyone to hear my story. I don't want anyone to know. You're the only person I've talked to about my life. I don't want my husband to become bad, I mean for people [that I know] to see him in another light [*here, Soheila means that she doesn't want her husband to appear as anything other than a morally upright provider*].

Physical adornment is a part of preserving one's *aberou* among one's community and implies keeping up with one's physical appearance by being well-groomed and dressed in articles of clothing that are well-kempt and/or in style at the time. For example, Yas often takes pains to wear the latest fashion trends. "My mom's side of the family is rich, while my dad's is low class. My mom always encourages us to buy the more expensive items of clothing so that we can save face in front of her family." The comments of 23-year-old Nina are further representative:

> I never wanted kids in my school to think that we were poor so I would dress nicely. My mom couldn't pay for my clothes so I started to work in order to be able to by nice clothes…You know, an iron doesn't cost that much, washing your clothes doesn't cost much, taking care of your appearance doesn't cost much.

Material resources are also a part of the *aberou* system. The possession of an automobile, housing, valuable electronic goods (e.g. laptop computers and mobile phones), and/or aesthetically pleasing home furnishings (for those who are married) including couches, rugs and new television sets not only operate to avert *aberou-rizi*, but also to convey to others that the young person and/or his family is "on the up and up" even when they are not. Similarly, poor young men and women go out of their way to

present guests with choice foodstuffs that they would never eat themselves. In these ways, individuals strive to portray themselves as financially secure even if they are struggling with dire poverty. This is intimately related to their need to give the impression of autonomy. As one low-income young woman stated, "(poor) women try to pretend that they are better off than they are, but in reality they don't even have dinner to eat. But rou shun nemishe [they don't have the face] to say that they don't have dinner."

Ta'arof or ritual courtesy, is the final part of the *aberou* system that affects the poor. Like other socio-economic groups in Iran, poor young men and women in Sari and Tehran practice *ta'arof*, which is a form of highly polite, connotative speech expressions and behaviors in Iran that are frequently used with non-intimates.[55] Under the rules of *ta'arof,* it is dishonorable (*aberou-rizi*) to shame a non-intimate to his face, to not practice generosity towards guests, and to be tactless in speech and conduct. However, more importantly, what is salient to understand about *ta'arof* among poor young men and women is that it is frequently used to save face before individuals with whom one interacts. Similar to the presentation of material goods, the person who practices *ta'arof* gives the appearance of not being in a weaker position than his counterpart in a brief, interpersonal exchange. One representative example is the exchange that occurred between Yas and I as we were traveling together. We arrived at our destination and as we were about to get off the bus, Yas pulled out some change from her purse insisting that she pay the bus fare for both of us. I refused. This exchange went on for a minute or two before Yas finally said (noticeably hurt), "I have that much money to pay for this! *[here Yas meant that she wasn't that bad off economically that she couldn't pay for the bus fare.]*"

In sum, embodying the virtues of autonomy, purity and appearances are means by which an individual can preserve his *aberou* as well as legitimate greater social standing within his community. In the latter case, the young person who is never seen asking for financial assistance, who exhibits moral and sexual purity and who takes pains to present himself and his home in the best possible light will have earned the admiration of his community members. People will be more willing to hire him because he is seen to have character (*ba shakhsiyat*), origin (*aseel*) and purity (*pak*) as well as seen as responsible (*masuliyat pazeer*). He will be judged as a good marriage candidate and his family and community will go to great lengths to ensure that he marries a similarly well-respected individual. He will be able to expand his informal networks since more people will want to associate with him. However, it should be noted that these three values are not evenly dispersed; poor youth and their communities place greater emphasis on certain values over others depending on the young person's life circumstances at the time. For instance, it is not expected for a poor young, single woman who is 15 years of age to contribute to the financial autonomy of the household by working if there is a working father and brother in the household. She is expected, though, to maintain her moral and sexual purity in order to avert shame (*aberou-rizi*).

Further still, the loss of *aberou* in one dimension does not mean that the individual will be wholly without honor (*bi-aberou*). The *aberou* of a person is not predisposed to complete ruin by failing in one honor-linked value dimension. Consider the following example. Sara, a young woman (in her early twenties) from a low-income

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[55] A number of studies have analyzed *taarof* in Iran (see, for instance, Beeman 1976; Behnam and Amizadeh 2011; Majd 2009; Wilber 1967).

family in Sari, was judged by everyone who knew her to be a *sexy girl* (an English phrase used in Iran to mean that the young woman in question has engaged in sexual practices). The young woman underwent shame (*aberou-rizi*) every time a community member condemned her behind her back. However, after a couple of years, community members started to say how she had "become better", that she was "nice" and that she had gained her associate's degree in computer technology and was working. Not only was the young woman able to gain measures of financial independence, but she also went to great lengths to treat everyone courteously and to keep her intimate relationships hidden from the rest of the neighborhood – practices which she was not observant of years earlier. While she would always be without some amount of *aberou*, the young woman was nevertheless able to preserve the rest of her honor and even gain the admiration of others by adhering to the values of autonomy and appearance. As such, the possession of *aberou* is not the either-or scenario that Peristiany (1965) claims it is: poor youth are not labeled as either those with honor or those without. A shameful act will result in shame (*aberou-rizi*), but the individual still maintains some *aberou* and can even derive value, admiration and social standing by embodying other honor-linked values (Wikan 1984).

Work

Poor youth place a high value on work.[56] In this moral system, dedication to work is considered to be good, while laziness is considered to be bad. The work code is both distinct and intertwined with the moral code of honor. In the former case, work is mainly instrumental rather than performative and is concerned with working for socio-economic survival and advancement. Furthermore, unlike honor, a person's commitment to the work code can be measured by the intensity of his efforts or in his effectiveness in achieving a particular goal. Under the honor code, it is the *manner* in which an action is performed that is the unit of analysis (Horowitz 1983). Finally, evaluations of one's dedication to work is highly individualistic and is based on the person's own commitment to hard work, rather than that of his family's.

There are points of overlap in the moral codes of honor and work, however. Implied in the honor-linked value of autonomy is an implicit assessment of one's work ethic: the individual who works hard will be able to gain financial success and thus socio-economic independence. Alternatively, the poor youth who begs or is in a position of economic vulnerability by others is deemed "lazy" and will have lost *aberou*. Thus, whether or not an individual abides by the moral code of work carries consequences for local assessments of his *aberou* and his subsequent standing within the community.

Upon first glance, the moral code of honor and the moral code of work may be seen as wholly collectivist and individualistic in orientation, respectively. Under the former code, the protection and maintenance of one's honor is both implicated by the honor of closely related others and is evaluated interpersonally. Under the latter code, it is the individual, rather than the group, who is salient. The individual's commitment to work is the unit of analysis rather than his reputation within a particular group. However, there are nuances within each code that complicate this rigid individualistic-collectivist dichotomy. The regnant notion in the social sciences that honor systems are inherently collective in nature and that a hard work ethic is necessarily individualistic have generally failed to understand the nature and functioning of these two moral systems

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[56] By "work", I mean the exertion of effort.

within different cultural contexts.[57] However much poor youth stress the importance of family, the moral code of honor among youth also stresses *individual autonomy* – as defined by one's ability to stand on his own – as a standard for interpersonal evaluations of one's *aberou* and subsequent social standing. One 15-year-old man, for example, was adamant about how public evaluations of one's marriage potential depended on his own ability to make money by holding down a job and at least completing secondary education. Alternatively, under the work code, the individual must place effort to serve both himself *and others*. For instance, one poor young woman in her mid-twenties stated how she had to work hard so that she could provide a better life (than what she had growing up) for her son.

Work, as a moral system, finds its basis in the religion of Islam. In their critical review of the work code in Muslim societies, Ali and Al-Owaihan (2008) discuss how Islamic theology holds work in significant regard. By foregrounding the ways in which both the Qu'ran and the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad (hadith) view work as a form of divine calling,[58] the authors identify the mediating factors that connect the work code to individual behaviors. However, like other studies that have investigated the Islamic work ethic (Ali and Azim 1999; Ahmad 2011; Rice 1999; Yousef 2000), their emphasis on the emergence of this work code is in the context of organizations and among middle-class occupational groups. Little is known about how lower-income Muslim groups in Islamic societies espouse the work ethic in the context of their day-to-day lives. Additionally, the Islamic work ethic is seen to be contradictory to the notion of divine determinism that is espoused by individuals in Muslim societies. However, as I will further demonstrate below, notions of divine determinism are not implicative of a lack of effort; one has no clear effect on the other. Therefore, to differentiate my conception of the code of work from that of the Islamic work ethic advocated by these scholars and to emphasize its grounding in the religion of Islam, I refer to the moral system of work here as the *Muslim work ethic*.

The Muslim work ethic among poor young men and women in Sari and Tehran is located in their adoption of the religious adage *az to harkat, az Khoda barkat* [God helps those who help themselves]. Those who adhere to this principle believe that an individual has to make a concerted effort to secure his livelihood. It is only when a person makes such an attempt that he can expect to receive divine rewards. In this way, religious faith cultivates and facilitates the emergence of a work ethic among poor youth. Take the following examples:

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[57] This has been a prominent misunderstanding of Middle Eastern culture by observers and social scientists alike, who have tended to characterize the Middle East as inherently "collectivist" in nature based on their valuation of and loyalty to kin while characterizing Western societies as wholly "individualistic" based on the tenants of the Protestant work ethic (see Gregg 2005).

[58]For instance, the Qur'an instructs Muslims to place effort and work wherever it is available: "Disperse through the land and seek the bounty of God" (Qur'an 62:10 as cited by Ali and Al-Owaihan 2008). Similarly, in the Hadiths, the Prophet Mohammad preached hard work and the importance of divine reward: "no one eats better food than that which he eats out of his work" and "God bless the worker who learns and perfects his profession (Ikhwan-us-Safa 1999:290 as cited by Ali and Al-Owaihan 2008).

[16-year-old Amin, a high school student in Sari]: God doesn't solve everything on his own. God says *az to harkat az Khoda barkat*. This means that you have to work hard, gather money, make effort, and God helps you. Otherwise, God doesn't help you. A person has to work, has to put in an effort, and God helps him in return.

[*22-year-old Elena, a homemaker in Sari whose husband is a store apprentice*]: God doesn't solve everything, you have to ask Him for help. And you yourself have to make an effort too to get [help].

Implicit in these comments is the belief that it is intent rather than outcome that is important for the Muslim work ethic. In this outlook, one only has to exert effort toward securing some socio-economic end in order to secure God's favor in return.

[Arash is a 25-year-old informal laborer in south Tehran]: Whatever I want, I ask from God…I'm making an effort, and I'm reaping the same amount of reward based on the amount of effort I put in.

Unlike the Protestant work ethic, the measure of one's morality in the Muslim work ethic is thus not contingent on visible signs of worldly success (see also Ali and Al-Owaihan 2008), making the two moral codes profoundly different from one another. In the Protestant work ethic, the need for proof of one's salvation influences the individual's everyday conduct centered around inner-worldly asceticism and hard work. In the Muslim work ethic, in contrast, salvation or in this case, divine reward, occurs *ex post facto*, that is, *after* one has shown himself to be hard working and responsible. Furthermore, under the Muslim work ethic, prayer in conjunction with personal effort is seen as a means to more effectively conjure divine grace:

[Amir is a 25-year-old informal worker in the fiberboard trade in south Tehran]: I'm content, thanks to God. God has been so kind to me. Even when I didn't see or go His way, He did his own thing. But if I went His way, and I supplicated and I asked him for help, well, it was really good. It really made a difference. He would really help me and my success came faster.

References – such as those of Amir's – to God's presence and influence on the course of events in his life have been viewed by many scholars of the Middle East as indicative of a culture of fatalism in Muslim societies (Ayrout 1963; Fukuyama 1992; Huntington 1993, 1996; Lewis 1990; Patai 1973). Scholars such as Huntington have contrasted this preoccupation with divine determinism or the "*Inshallah* [God willing] complex"[59] (as most everything in the Muslim world begins or ends with this phrase) with the principles espoused by the work ethic deemed to be so prevalent in the West. These views mirror Weber's (1922) implicit assertion that fatalism in Islam has a retarding effect on development and modern capitalism because it makes people adverse to any effort.[60] However, as I found, resignation to God's will is not associated with a

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[59] See Gregg (2005).

[60] In the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber makes specific references to Islamic fatalism stating that "Islamic belief in predestination easily assumed fatalistic characteristics in the beliefs of the masses" (Weber [1922] 1991: 205). In this manner, Islamic

lack of initiative. Rather, it surfaces as both a source of comfort in the face of uncertainty and more importantly as a means by which poor youth believe they will reap greater rewards from God. While Geist and Gregg (1985) argue that individual Muslims express "resignation in the solace of religious fatalism" *only* when they are unable to achieve some socio-economic end,[61] I found that poor young men and women express belief in the ultimate will of the divine *while* they are in the process of undertaking a socio-economic activity. This belief is grounded in the idea that one has to be content with what God gives – and God will give whatever He wants – so that he can gain God's favor as well as receive divine compensation. As one poor, young woman in Sari in her late twenties stated: "[Youth my age] should be thankful to God and be content [with what He gives]. If they have *ghena'at [contentness]*, they will get what they want faster." In this manner, the will of God does not simply determine human action, but is also contingent on it (Acevedo 2008). While poor young men and women believe that God or some higher moral order controls the outcome of one's actions, they also believe that one has an active role in shaping specific outcomes as well. Poor youth therefore espouse what Elder (1966) has termed "theological fatalism" which is contrasted with "empirical fatalism" or the "belief that empirical phenomenon occur for no comprensible reason and they cannot be controlled" (Elder 1966: 229).[62] The following comments from 29-year-old Homa, a poor bazaar vendor in Sari, are representative:

> My husband cheated on me with this girl when we were engaged. Now, I heard that the girl has married this drug addict who cheated on her… *Har ki badi kone … tu hamin donya talafi mishe [loosely similar to the notion of karma – a person's bad actions will eventually return to him with equal impact in this world]*….It is *khaste Khoda [God's will]*, but the person himself has a brain, has ears, has a conscience. He has to make an effort…. Before I got married, I would pray to God that He would make it so that I could marry Bahman [Homa's husband]. But I can't say that *har chi Khoda mikhad pish miyad [whatever God wants will happen]*. I wanted it myself.

Values of the Muslim Work Ethic

Under the Muslim work ethic, two things are valued: financial accomplishment and academic achievement. It should be noted that these two values are not evenly dispersed; poor young men and women place greater emphasis on one value over the other depending on where they are in the life course. For instance, youth in their mid-late teens who are still in school place emphasis on academic achievement while those in their twenties value financial accomplishment. Despite their life circumstances, however, the ability to make money and/or to move easily from one grade to the next is indicative of

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theology is associated with an irrational form of fatalism that is incompatible with modern capitalism.

[61] Regarding this, Gregg (2005) argues that the opening of opportunity breeds an ahievement-oriented, Muslim-ethicist religiosity while the closing of opportunity breeds resignation in the solace of religious fatalism. To this end, he argues, fatalism plays no greater a role in Islam than it does in any other religion.

[62] Using the 2003 World Values Survey, Acevedo (2008) empirically tested Elder's two-dimensional view of fatalism in Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia and for the purposes of the current study, found that Iranians tend to be more theologically than empirically fatalistic.

the effort that an individual exerts in his life. Being able to earn income and/or to progress within the educational system are measures by which one's morality is measured. For instance, Yas became engaged to a young man who was considered "good" because he worked hard and was able to hold down a steady job.

Financial accomplishment and academic achievement also operate to preserve the poor young person's *aberou*. Financial achievement suggests the young person's increasing capability to act independently. For instance, one young man in his mid-twenties from a low-income family in Tehran decided to start working because "*ruham nemishod az pedaram begiram [my "face" (honor) wouldn't let me ask for money from my dad]* because my *ghorur [manhood/pride associated with one's manhood]* wouldn't let me." Academic achievement, in turn, enables the young person to secure his image within the local community as a learned individual. Similarly, the value placed on making money enables the poor individual to secure the material goods and personal style needed to safeguard his reputation before the public judgment. The poor youth's possession of these virtues subsequently leads to a higher status position among his community peers. Thus, the values of the Muslim work ethic are deeply entwined with the values of the honor code and provide a set of criteria to guide not only socio-economic action, but also judgment and evaluation (Rokeach 2000).

The first desirable trait valued under the Muslim work ethic is the ability to make money. In this view, working hard to earn money has the importance that it does because those who possess relatively large amounts of financial capital are able to protect their honor in a way that those with a smaller volume of economic capital cannot (see Bourdieu 1984). For instance, being able to find and work in a job that pays well becomes a high priority, especially for males who are expected to become the primary breadwinners of their current or future households. To this end, it is not the job itself that is valued, but the amount of money that it can bring. Moreover, the more one commits oneself to work, the more money he can earn. In this way, concerns over social honor and the simultaneous importance attached to material matters are not simply the purview of the bourgeosie as Bourdieu (1984) has noted, but also for the poor. Consider the comments of Qasim:

> I graduated with a technical degree and I know how to do every technical job you can think of like welding, mechanics, whatever. But when I see that it doesn't bring home the bread, I'll quit the job. I'll do whatever work I have to in order to make my life go round. I used to work in a company *[here, Qasim means that he used to be a formal contracted employee]* but it didn't pay well, so I left. And now I got a truck and take stuff around town.

Indeed, for young individuals who are living in conditions of material scarcity, making money is considered to be the main means by which they can live a dignified life. Money is considered to bring with it not only access to material luxuries like clothing, houses, cars and electronics, but also to intangible goods including greater recreational time. In an effort to preserve *aberou*, young individuals not only *spend* money when they can on themselves, their families and their guests, but they also actively attempt to *save* money so that they can secure large ticket items such as gold, an apartment, a store or a car. One poor young woman in Sari, for instance, would not hesitate to buy expensive clothing for herself and her family with the meager wages she earned operating a beauty

salon from her home, all the while attempting to save money in order to purchase her own home. Thus, while Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) found that poor individuals either adhere to an excitement-maximizing value orientation that places emphasis on consumption *or* to a security-maximizing value orientation that emphasizes frugality, the poor youth in my study *simultaneously* valued both investment and consumption and saw them as indicative of their financial accomplishment because both investment and consumption enabled them to embody the values associated with the Muslim work ethic and the code of honor.[63] Indeed, financial accomplishment was one of the instruments by which they could embody the virtues associated with the code of honor and gain status in the process.

The second value associated with the Muslim work ethic is academic achievement. Poor youth largely measure their academic achievement by their ability to smoothly transition from one grade to the next. For the young person who is still in school, the school becomes the focal institution of his everyday life. As such, the youth as well as adults in the community tend to measure his diligence by way of his commitment to studying. For instance, one poor 16-year-old in Sari, Amir Ali, who failed six of his high school classes, was the constant target of his mother's reprisals, who worried that her son's lack of a work ethic would result in his ultimate failure. "Amir Ali only studies for 20 minutes everyday. Then he goes to watch television or play on the computer….I tell him to study in a nice way, and he doesn't listen. I tell him to study in a harsh way, and he doesn't listen. I just don't know what to do!", his mother would often exclaim. In this manner, the young person who is lazy (*tanbal*) is the one who does not make an effort to study. Families view the young person who is not able to study and smoothly transition from one grade to the next with concern, for he has given up on the possibility of achievement through work.

In contrast, a consequence of academic achievement is the sustenance of the young person's *aberou*. Among poor youth, the completion of secondary education is seen to be one of the minimum requirements necessary to preserve their honor before local assessment. As one young man stated, "in front of people, it's *aberou-rizi [shameful]* if you don't have at least a high school diploma. If you want a wife, she won't want you if you don't have at least that." Moreover, parents use their daughter's or son's academic accomplishments as a way to secure his/her image within the broader community as a learned individual, thereby simultaneously attempting to increase the family's reputation in front of others. One domestic housekeeper, for instance, would constantly boast to her employers of her 15-year-old son's accomplishments in school, stating how he always received high grades in school and would never waste time hanging out with other kids in their neighborhood.

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[63] The difference between my findings and those of Sanchez-Jankowski can be attributed to the fact that poor individuals in his study were divided in their value orientations, with one group valuing excitement-maximization and the other, security-maximization. Each value orientation dictated that either consumption or investment would be "right". Alternatively, poor youth's valuation of both honor and work dictated that both consumption and investment would be morally right.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In sum, the moral codes of honor and work and their attendant values dominate among poor young individuals and are the means by which individual character and conduct is sustained. By enabling poor youth to lay claim to the respect that is accrued to the honorable, these moral systems provide them with an intangible route for social status as well as a unique scale that poor youth and their communities use to assess each other's honor (Abu-Lughod 1998; Sev'er and Yurdakul 2001). It further provides a type of stratification system hierarchy among youth in the lower classes (see Conclusion). Nevertheless, situational contingencies make it difficult for poor youth to act in accordance with these codes all the time. Under certain circumstances, youth will use specific rationalizations, which I will discuss in the next chapters, to negotiate and develop their own particular interpretations of these moral systems. Finally, it is important to understand that commitments to honor and the work ethic do not necessarily lead youth to achieve economic mobility. For instance, it may appear that a commitment to the Muslim work ethic would lead individuals to invest effort and time in accruing greater human capital in order to improve their opportunities for future economic gain and to be in a better position to defend their *aberou*. However, since those who believe in academic achievement also place emphasis on maintaining a certain self-image to save face, they can become prone to doing whatever is needed to protect their *aberou* in times of shortage, including foregoing academic achievement to capitalize on the informal sector.

CHAPTER 3

ASPIRATIONS AND THE QUEST FOR MOBILITY

In Chapter 1, I described how the moral code of *aberou* and the Muslim work ethic provide the basis for a set of values that shape poor young people's worldview. This chapter addresses the question of how this worldview, once operative, informs these youths' aspirations. Most sociological studies of low-income youth have argued that structurally determined constraints on social mobility are internalized by poor youth and give rise to these youths' frustration, hopelessness and leveled aspirations (Anderson 1998; Cloward and Ohlin 1960; Miller 1958; MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977). However, this approach is vulnerable to two inaccuracies. The first is overlooking the character of aspirations themselves and how they contribute to solidify the poor young person's membership within his own social world: for instance, a young woman's aspiration for marriage and its effect on her public reputation. When a young, 19-year-old woman states that her only aspirations are to "get married to a good man", she is not espousing a self-defeatist attitude or a pessimistic outlook on her chances of success, but asserting that she wants a respected position within her community as an honorable woman who will have preserved her good name through a successful marriage. The second misunderstanding of aspirations is the tendency to overestimate the poor young individual's level of despondency by precipitately assuming that aspirations are the result of differential reactions to one's class limitations. Too often, statements such as "there are no hopes when you have a job like this" are taken as indicative of the poor young person's extreme disillusionment and frustration with his economic circumstances and chances for upward mobility.[64] Rarely does the literature on aspirations look past these statements to

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[64] An outstanding example of this is MacLeod's (1987) interpretation of the aspirations of lower-class white youth in a low-income neighborhood in the U.S. Comments such as "All's I'm doing, I'm gonna get enough money, save enough money to get my mother the fuck out of here (34)" are interpreted by MacLeod solely as instances of the stigma that the boys feel as public housing

understand the significance that these "hopeless" jobs hold in the young person's life. For instance, while a young man may state that street vending provides him with no hope, he is also quick to add that the job has enabled him to save some money and pay for monthly expenses. This is not to say that one's perceptions of structural immobility (or mobility) cannot produce disillusionment or be a key factor in shaping one's aspirations, because it can, as I will demonstrate in this chapter. However, research that solely focuses on structural explanations neglects how cultural values can interact with structural constraints to affect the meanings that poor youth attach to their different set of aspirations.

From direct observations of social life among poor Iranian youth in Sari and Tehran, this chapter argues that poor young people's ideas of the good life can only be understood within the context of the interrelationship between their values, needs, and subjective perceptions and the objective opportunities that they face. The link between their subjective perceptions and the objective opportunities surrounding them is particularly important for understanding how poor youth attempt to improve their life chances within conditions of economic deprivation. Values and needs give rise to material and non-material aspirations, which, in turn, enable youth to accumulate opportunities that are subjectively strategically manageable and valuable to them. Thus, any treatment of aspirations that views them solely as a function of the possessor's reaction to structural constraints is ill-equipped to understand how seemingly leveled aspirations possess some autonomous capacity for generating growth in the poor young person's well-being.

MATERIAL ASPIRATIONS

The recurring material aspiration that poor youth articulate is the desire and urge to accumulate money and physical possessions. Motivations to gather large amounts of material possessions, however, do not simply stem from a desire to maximize capital for its own sake, as has been the view in many studies of urban poverty as well as those that deal with the relationship between poverty and social instability in both the developing and developed worlds (see, for instance, Brett and Specht 2004; Dohan 2003; Herrera 2010; Lia 2005; MacLeod 1987).[65] Many of these studies overwhelmingly point to poor people's desires to secure and improve their economic well-being as their guiding motivation for acquiring money and material incentives. For instance, in her study on Egypt's popular classes, Singerman (1995) argues:

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tenants, rather than as examples of how the boys' leveled aspirations can simultaneously function to provide value and meaning and make life functional for these youth.

[65] In the developed world for instance, Sanchez-Jankowski (1999), found that gang members in the U.S. believe that material goods will provide them with the "good" life, I found that poor youth in Iran strive for cash and material goods not just to live the "good" life, but more importantly, to save face in their communities. Of course, the relatively greater importance of saving face in Iran is a reflection of the significance that honor holds within poor communities in Iran. One can easily lose honor indefinitely if he is not able to measure up to ideals of the *aberou-mand* individual. Alternatively, among the gang members Sanchez-Jankowski studied, honor (often defined by members as respect) can easily be re-gained through the accumulation of greater material possessions.

"Unskilled laborers, in most occupations, who tend to be not very educated, are, however, better paid and receive more benefits than employees in government and public enterprises and thus have little incentive to change occupations."

While informal sector jobs in Iran frequently pay more than their formal counterparts, poor youth hold on to these jobs not simply to maximize wealth. Indeed, poor youth in Iran complicate this view precisely because their material aspirations are predicated on their understanding of what money can provide. These individuals care so strongly about accumulating capital and material goods not simply because of a desire to acquire greater creature comforts, but because money and physical possessions mainly operate to distance poor youth from those who are *bi-aberou* as well as to increase the poor young person's regard in the eyes of others. In this regard, both honor and social privilege are achieved by embodying work- and honor-linked material aspirations.

Rather than place emphasis on money and material goods for its own sake, these youth focus attention outward toward other people's judgments about their financial accomplishments when they aspire to accumulate money and physical possessions. There is an element of calculation in their aspirations, as they seek to acquire the most efficient course of action that will lead them to save face and increase their standing among their community of peers. This element of calculation most clearly manifests itself in the poor youth's aspirations for well-paying jobs and for connections that may enable him to improve his economic and social standing. Here I examine each of these motivations in turn.

Well-Paying Jobs

Poor young individuals do not express aspirations to work in any job they can find, but to work in a job that pays decently. However, having a job with decent pay is not synonymous with having a high-status job. Indeed, finding a white-collar job in the formal labor market – which is considered high-status in mainstream Iranian society – is often difficult for poor youth who lack adequate economic capital, education and influential networks. Many youth are aware of this and thus come to measure the value of a job in *tomans*[66]; the amount of money they can earn in the job is generally seen as more important than its status in Iranian society.[67] Other youth, particularly those who are younger and who have not yet personally experienced or observed the difficulties of landing high status jobs, express optimism about their prospects of becoming white-collar professionals. However, as they gain experience, they realize that they, too, must strive for jobs that will enable them to make ends meet and move forward, irrespective of the job's social rank. For instance, one young 17-year-old man who sold gym clothes from a cardboard box in south Tehran wanted to have a Bachelor's and have a job where he sat "behind a desk", but had to drop out after the 9th grade in order to pay for his family's expenses.

There are poor youth who manage to attain relatively high-standing, formal sector jobs in both cities. However, many of these young people ultimately decide to leave their jobs in order to gain more income in the informal sector. One young, 29-year-old woman in Sari left her job as a pre-school assistant teacher to become an apprentice at a lingerie

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[66] Tomans refers to the superunit of currency in Iran. While the rial is the official currency, most Iranians use the term "toman" in their everyday transactions. 1 toman=10 rials.

[67] This finding is similar to Horowitz's (1983) finding that Mexican-American gang members in the United States generally value the money they earn on the job more than the job's status.

stall in a local bazaar because "the pay [from the teaching job] was low – only around 50,000 tomans (approximately 50 USD) a month – and it was too far away from where I lived. I had to take two taxis to get there." While the particular job is seen as less important than the money that it can bring, poor youth nevertheless are sensitive to the status connotations of their jobs in mainstream society. For instance, when asked about their line of work, young informal laborers provide vague answers such as giving the location, stating the type of company they work in, or declaring that they are in *kare azad* (free work/freelance). They never state the kind of job they do unless prodded. They are similarly conscious about the status connotations of their parents' jobs:

> Researcher: What does your father do?
> Mojtaba *[23-year-old pistachio vendor in Tehran]*: Oh, he works in an insurance company.
> R: So he's an office worker?
> M: No, he brings tea and stuff.
> R: Oh, he's the *abdarchi* [*servant whose primary responsibility is providing drinks to an office staff]*?
> M: Yeah.

This conversation is particularly illustrative of how poor young individuals value – as Assam stated in Chapter 1 – *dorost hesabi* jobs (i.e. decent, honorable jobs). While some like Assam may be successful in attaining them, they soon realize that they can earn more money working in less honorable (*aberou-mand*), but better paying jobs in the informal sector. For youth like Assam, the issue is not about finding a job that will earn them enough money to survive. More accurately, these youth focus their desires on procuring an income that will allow them to advance. The Iranian government has been able to ensure – largely through subsidies – that the majority of its population has access to minimum basic food and clothing.[68] As a result, compared to impoverished youth in some developing societies, poor Iranian youth rarely confront the actual problem of surviving – that is, shelter over one's head, clothes on one's back and food in one's mouth[69]. Rather, the dilemma of advancing – by securing a nicely furnished house, electronic goods, stylish clothes, or – for married young individuals – pricey foodstuffs such as elaborate rice dishes and meats that they can present to guests are what drive them to yearn for jobs that they can capitalize on.

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[68] During my fieldwork, in January 2010, the Iranian parliament passed a subsidy reform plan that replaced subsidies on food and energy with targeted social assistance in a move toward achieving free-market prices in five years. Under the new plan, each Iranian family receives 40 USD per month per household member. Thus, a family of five receives 200 USD in cash per month. Given recent price hikes in the cost of energy, fuel and basic consumer goods (to compensate for the subsidies), however, it remains to be seen whether or not these cash payments can make up for such high inflation rates.

[69] The fact that poor young people in Iran do not suffer from starvation does not mean that nutrition is not a problem. The shortage of micronutrients that comes from not being able to afford meat and assorted fresh fruits – two of the more expensive food items that my informants frequently went without – is a widespread problem among poor youth and their families in both cities.

For instance, when a poor young married man is invited to share a meal, he is obliged to reciprocate the generosity in kind. When his guests come to judge his reputation, they will often recount his physical adornments (clothing and accessories), the quantity and quality of food that he can offer, the type of furnishings or goods that he has, and/or the condition of his house. While such norms of reciprocity operate to preserve the poor young man's *aberou* and strengthen his social ties, they also place a heavy economic burden on him and necessitate that he has sufficient financial resources to participate in its rules. In reality, gifts of material goods and services are considered debts that must be repaid by the receiver in order to prevent the loss of his *aberou.* The following examples are representative:

> Maryam left the salon today worried about presenting a proper dinner to her guests – her husband's family. She said, "my husband's sister cooks ten course meals. How am I going to top that?! I can make three or four dishes."

> Mina *[the salon owner]* was recounting today just how bad off financially Samira is *[Samira is in her twenties and also works as an apprentice in the same salon]*. "Samira's parents have to pay for her child's diapers and such things *[Samira recently had a baby].* "Still, given this," Mina said, "her brother in law's wedding is coming up and Samira is going to buy 200,000 tomans *[approximately 200 USD]* worth of wedding gifts. Even though she doesn't have money, she needs to do these things to save face."

While studies of gift-giving and exchange in the Middle East tend to view these informal networks as an unequivocally beneficial social contract, a type of "social insurance" whereby participants are safeguarded from slipping into further financial insecurity (Hoodfar 1997; Lambton 1994; Norton 2001; Singerman 1995), the reality is that these ties can encumber individuals as much as they can reinforce social cohesiveness within a community (Mauss 1925; Sahlins 1972). For instance, while Hoodfar (1997) found that low-income households in urban Cairo were expected to participate in exchanges according to their own means, among the low-income young men and women I knew, no one was willing to contribute a gift that would be suggestive of a lack of financial resources, even if it was well-known that they were suffering economically.[70] An intense commitment to the etiquettes associated with ritual courtesy (*ta'arof*) implied that these young people went out of their way to save face among their community of peers. To be able to afford participating in the exchange networks that pervaded daily life in these communities, youth had to intensify their efforts in the labor market by searching for lower status, but better paying jobs in the informal sector that would allow them to return gifts and services in kind.

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[70] The extent of reciprocity in Iran, however, varies according to social distance. The closer (socially) the gift-giver is to the gift-receiver, the less obligatory it is for the returned gift to be similar in value or kind to the original. Sahlins (1972) was the first to develop a model of reciprocity that varies with social distance. According to his model, as one moves away from kin and peers to strangers and enemies, one practices generalized reciprocity (altruistic gift-giving that may involve a return of assistance if necessary, but items exchanged need not be similar), balanced reciprocity (exchange of similar items), and negative reciprocity (extreme end of reciprocity that involves theft, barter and gambling), respectively.

Connections

Similar to other low-income groups[71], poor youth in Iran believe that in the quest for economic security, connections are everything. In Iran, an individual's informal networks are formed through his personal ties and commitments and consist of groups of kin, friends and acquaintances who are doing better (in some socio-economic dimension) than the individual himself. These ties often prove more valuable in Iran than one's education or work experience in securing opportunities for a steady, well-paying job, a higher wage or a promotion.[72] Often cloaked in the language of friendship or kinship, material motivations permeate many of these informal connections. Take the comments of 16-year-old Amin:

> "You have to be friends with people who are well-dressed, organized and rich. Because then that friend can be useful to you in the future."

The lower the individual's socio-economic standing, the more vulnerable he is to changes in his household income, external shocks and/or labor market fluctuations and the more reliant he becomes on his informal networks to provide goods and services such as in-kind transfers, jobs and pay raises. Termed *party baazi*, securing concessions through such acts of cronyism or nepotism is pivotal in aiding the poor individual to incrementally improve his life situation. In order to prosper within this context, poor youth know that they must cultivate ties with people in positions that can aid their economic advancement. One young, 19-year-old man in Sari, for instance, used his close relationship with a family friend who had started a fiberboard business to secure a position as his apprentice. Another 17-year-old, Nader, would spend every afternoon at the grocery store of a family friend, Mr. Behzad, who – by way of his connections – got Nader into one of the best high schools in the city. Time spent at the grocery store not only enabled Nader to relax after school, but it also gave him the opportunity to foster even closer ties with Mr. Behzad whom Nader knew could help him yet again in the future. "It's a productive way to spend my free time," Nader would say. "We [my friend, Reza, and I] sit there, joke around with him [Mr. Behzad] and sometimes watch over the store when he's gone…He knows everyone." The following example, that of young, 20-year-old Aida, exemplifies in greater detail poor youth's desire to incorporate themselves into their community's informal networks and how these networks, once operative, allow these youth to achieve individual and collective goals:

> Aida lives on the perimeters of Sari next door to an upper-middle-class sheikh and his family. Aida's father was diagnosed with cancer a few years ago. With the onset of her father's illness, her family's income suffered a huge hit. Nowadays Aida manages the affairs of the household while her mother works as the sole breadwinner. As a farm laborer, though, her mother's work is seasonal and her wages (approximately $250/month) are barely enough to pay for household expenses. But not only has her mother managed to have enough to feed her entire family, but to also pay for her husband's cancer treatments, secure a large television set and video gaming system and

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[71] See, for instance, Venkatesh's (1994) study of urban poor men and women in Chicago.

[72] These ties closely approximate Coleman's (1988) emphasis on the productive nature of social capital that might offset deficiencies in other types of capital, including human and cultural capital (see also, Bourdieu 1986; Burt 1998; Portes 2000; Putnam 2000).

make plans to acquire a motorcycle for her young son. "When Aida's dad fell ill, people like the sheikh and his family, Aida's aunt and others in the neighborhood started to help them out", Aida's friend recalled.

Aida, however, does not passively sit around waiting for others to help out. Rather, she actively pursues opportunities to foster ties and capitalize on them. One of Aida's closest friends is the sheikh's daughter, Amira. Aida often goes to Amira's house (also next door) during her downtime to chat and hang out. While her friendship with Amira provides Aida with much-needed opportunities to relax, Aida does not attempt to cloak her underlying hopes for the goods and services that Amira and her family can provide. During one encounter, Aida asked Amira to get Hasan (Amira's friend) to give Aida's brother his spare motorcycle. "You don't know how *sharmandeh [embarrassed]* we are", Aida's mother interjected. "No, no, of course we would do this, it's nothing", Amira quickly responded.

Aida often voices her desire for a good, well-paying job in front of Amira as well. Both young women, however, know that the underlying desire is Aida's hope that Amira will help her secure a job. "I used to work as a beautician in a salon, but the pay was too low (approximately $40/month) and the hours were long and my husband and I decided that it wasn't worth it for me to continue. I just want to find a good job", Aida said in one particular get-together with Amira. Before too long, Amira informed Aida about a job opening at a local pharmacy. "The pharmacy is looking for an apprentice and Aida said she wanted the job. [I connected her with] a woman who is going to teach her the basics of the job before she applies", Amira recounted.

NON-MATERIAL ASPIRATIONS

While poor youth strive to secure their *aberou* and achieve some form of recognition or status by acquiring money and material possessions through jobs and informal networks, they know that the accumulation of physical resources is not enough to maintain their integrity or to enhance their status within the community. To fully secure their position as honorable and admired members of the community, poor youth believe they must also receive some type of higher education, find a good marriage match, be an upright individual and be able to provide for their families. In so doing, they create a prestige-allocation system,[73] whereby those who are not able to achieve these goals are allocated lower prestige than those who are. Status distinctions are thus formed among poor youth as a result of the differential demonstration of non-material aspirations associated with the moral codes of honor and the Muslim work ethic. This is a particularly salient point because many studies of status systems have assumed that these systems can be explained in terms of material inequality alone (see, for instance, Blau and Duncan 1967; Featherman and Hauser 1976; Goldthorpe and Hope 1972; Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992). These is due to a mistaken assumption among Western social scientists that people confer prestige on a person and/or admire him solely because of the place he occupies within material systems of wealth and power (Hatch 1989). In this view, the desire to accumulate wealth becomes the only motivator of people's actions. However, as early social scientists have shown (Barkow 1975; Germani 1966; Polanyi 1945; Weber 1922), purely material motivations are less relevant to the interests of

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[73] I borrow this term from Barkow (1975).

individuals than questions of social recognition, security and honor. As the non-material aspirations I detail below demonstrate, systems of social honor and/or prestige do not always correspond with systems of material inequality. Indeed, the former are often governed by their own set of rules.

Higher Education

Receiving some form of higher education is looked upon favorably not because it is assumed to necessarily increase one's job prospects (see Sources section below), but because it both reflects the young person's willingness to exert effort in life and is one of the most secure methods of protecting the young person's *aberou* and increasing the respect that is bestowed upon him. Not only does the community's admiration of the poor youth increase if he is able to finish high school and receive some form of post-secondary education since he is deemed as a hard-worker, but his *aberou* is also less susceptible to attack because communities respect learned individuals. Like their Egyptian counterparts (Singerman 1995),[74] many Iranian families want children to remain in school because they value education, knowledge, and learned people. These findings, alone, challenge the assumption of the devaluation of education among the poor in the developing world (see, particularly, Harrison and Huntington 2000). Similarly, few poor youths in Sari and Tehran berate anyone for going to school or fail to publicize an individual within their families or extended social circles who has managed to go to college, scoring prestige points in the process. For instance, one poor, young woman whose father had recently passed away was quick to add how her father would not have died if her paternal cousin, who was a doctor and had his own practice, was his medical provider.[75] The benefits of remaining in school and gaining entry into college, thus, do not simply extend to the poor young individual, but to his entire family. Indeed, for some parents, the ability to simply state to others that one's son or daughter is currently attending college is enough in and of itself to secure the family's *ghorur* or honorable pride as well as increase their standing in the community.[76]

High baccalaureate examination scores required to get into Iran's prestigious free-of-charge public universities and the high cost of attendance of private universities which have much less stringent grade requirements means that many poor youth will be unsuccessful in attaining a post-secondary education in the form of college. As a result, many resign themselves to the belief that they will never be able to secure a university education. These individuals come to develop more modified educational aspirations that are informed by their everyday realities. Learning opportunities in the informal economy, particularly apprenticeships,[77] are especially sought after for the higher-level vocational skills that they confer. By training poor youth in transferable skills, master craftspeople

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[74] Singerman (1995) found a similar pattern among individuals in the lower strata of Egyptian society.

[75] In Iran, one only has to pass the *concour* (general baccalaureate) with high marks in order to gain acceptance into five-year medical colleges and become a general practicing physician.

[76] There were a few instances where young women in their late twenties recalled their fathers' disapproval of their education. The young womens' fathers had stated that there was no reason for their daughters to go to school, since their primary responsibility was to take care of their current and future households.

[77] For a list of commonly held apprenticeships among poor youth in Sari and Tehran, refer to Chapter 3, Table 2.

or businessmen enable the apprentice (*shagerd*) to not only earn money, but also to gain the opportunity to learn the vocational skills that can eventually help them establish their own businesses. The apprentice system enables poor youth to gradually build up a business network with suppliers and clients, further contributing to the *shagerd*'s future employability. Apprenticeships traditionally develop the poor young person's technical skills in fields such as carpentry, welding and hairdressing. However, since the learning process frequently takes place in a business setting, poor youth also learn entrepreneurial skills such as price negotiation and sales.

Such informal training opportunities represent incremental approaches that youth believe will both build on their educational experience and improve their life situation. These apprenticeships not only develop poor youths' knowledge, but also provide them with both qualifications that enable them to earn more money over time and with a subjective scale that they use to judge their peers. Unable to afford college, one poor young man in Sari, for instance, became an apprentice in a supply store upon graduating from high school in order to invest money and build the entrepreneurial skills and business networks that would enable him to start his own supply business. The following example is further representative:

> 22-year-old Maral, a newly wed from a low-income family in Sari, jumped at opportunities to enter beautician training programs at local salons. She managed to pass the state examination required to obtain her cosmetology license and began to draw plans to open up her own salon in the city. At the last minute, Maral decided that to have a competitive edge, she needed more training in makeup application techniques and began to apprentice at a local salon in order to learn them. Maral often used the extent of her peers' beauty school training as an indicator of their expertise, stating one day: "Sarah keeps boasting that she knows how to do eyebrows really well and all that, but she didn't come to Miraj *[a local salon in Sari where Maral trained the previous year]* all that much to learn."

Marriage

The second non-material aspiration that poor youth articulate is the desire to get married. With marriage, the poor young person is able to gain autonomy from the parental unit, control over his own household and official sanction to satisfy his emotional and physical needs. Given Iran's cultural and religious norms, it is nearly impossible for youth to gain these objectives outside the institution of marriage (see Singerman 1995). Indeed, poor youth – regardless of their age or gender – almost exclusively reside with their families until they get married.[78] Both youth and their communities thus see marriage as the gateway to adulthood, to greater self-sufficiency and to honor. For these reasons alone, delaying marriage beyond a certain age is not considered "normal." Take the comments of Nader, whom we met in Chapter 1:

> People here get married around the same age as everyone else…in their twenties. Below 20 isn't normal for marriage. And above 30 definitely isn't normal!

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[78] This is common practice across socio-economics groups in Iran. However, college students, conscripts and those (particularly men) who have found work in other cities are not obligated to live with family.

At issue here, however, is not simply a desire to gain independence (through marriage) at any cost. For poor young men with marital aspirations, having sufficient financial resources to be able to provide for their families offset their desire to get married "as soon as possible." Indeed, if a young man were to get married before he has accumulated adequate economic capital to provide for his new family, he would jeopardize his image as an honorable person and lose the respect of his community. Poor young women who desire to get married often hedge their bets, preferring to wait in order to find a "good" match rather than marry the first suitor that comes along, thereby risking making the wrong choice, shaming themselves and their families, and lowering their status in the community. Indicative of a "good" man is his aptitude to treat women well, his degree of generosity and kindness, and his ability to hold down a steady job and to be able to provide for his new family. The views of Sherazad, a twenty-two-year-old NGO worker from a low-income family in Sari, are representative:

> I've always prayed to God that He would give me a good husband. My best friend always asked God for a rich husband and all her suitors ended up behaving like animals. But I asked for my [future] man to be good. My husband *[Sherazad recently married]* is kind and though he seems proud from the outside, he's such a good person. He's very independent…he's my age. But he's been through so much hardship that he's so much more mature than his age…. He has his own *kabob* stand in the city.

Sherazad's comments touch upon an important point. The ability to find a good marriage match is one that that the poor youth leaves to divine destiny rather than to his own devices. Scholars have tended to read such references to divine will as instances of resignation in the comfort of (Islamic) fatalism (Ayrout 1963; Berger 1962; Hamady 1960; Patai 1973),[79] fatalism that breeds inaction. However, I found that while the poor young person believes that God will ultimately determine his marital outcomes, this does not make him adverse to making a concerted effort to attract a potential mate such as by attempting to look good or by asking for someone's hand in marriage. Rather than implying passivity on the part of the young person, references that suggest God's influence on one's marital outcomes are indicative of the young person's sense of the contingent nature of their undertakings. In this outlook, while one can seek to marry someone that he likes, only God can know if his efforts will prove fruitful or if the marriage turns out to be a success. This notion of marital predestination further operates to give youth comfort in times of hardship. Take the comments of Qasim, for example:

> I'm a child from [the city of] Karaj and my wife is from Yaftabad…I didn't even know who she was, she was living her life… I never even went up north, I never even went anywhere outside of my own *mahal [neighborhood]*. It was my destiny to marry this girl. I didn't have anything the day I went to ask for her hand in marriage. I only had 30,000 tomans *[approximately 30 USD]* in my pocket. I took my brother's coat…the shoes of my other brother, and the clothes of my third brother and I went just like that. What I mean by all this is that someone *ghesmatam shod [became my destiny]* who would cry for me and comfort me the first three years of our life when I would cry and say I couldn't find work….Her gold – a woman's greatest possession is her gold, you know – she sold every piece of her gold jewelry and that helped us to keep our life going

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[79] But see Fakhouri (1987) and Gregg (2005).

for those first three months before I found work. Finding a wife like that isn't a joke! It was destiny that caused me to leave Karaj and go to Yaftabad and find a girl like that who looks out for me in every way. By God. This is destiny. I never even thought a person like that would come into my life. My cousins wanted to marry me [before],[80] but if a problem had come up [in our marriage], they wouldn't have been able to survive. But now….*Khoda ro shokr* [thank God]! I got lucky in finding a wife. It's 100 percent because of God – I have no doubt.

Uprightness

The fourth non-material aspiration common among poor young men and women is the urge to be upright. Poor youth express a strong desire to be morally decent individuals – that is, individuals who work hard, do not do drugs or infringe in any way on the rights of others, and who live an honest, God-fearing life. Unlike well-paying jobs, connections, higher education and a good marriage, which depend on a combination of factors exogenous to the young individual himself including labor market opportunities, his financial resources and chance, poor youth believe that uprightness is most directly related to one's own aptitude and effort. They believe in themselves as capable of being virtuous individuals and see uprightness as an opportunity to prove their self-worth. The views of 16-year-old Mohammad provide a good example of this outlook:

> My first year of high school, I wanted my discipline grade to be high so that my teachers would know that I wasn't a bad person and that I studied hard. [I worked hard] and I ended up getting a perfect 20/20!

Poor young people's belief in their capability to be morally upright often takes on a dogmatic character. Poor youth not only use other individuals' degree of virtuosity as a yardstick to judge their worthiness as potential friends, but also to "teach" them how they should behave. The following incident between Nader and his friend Hossein provides a good example:

> *[Note: Nader's younger brother, Bijan, has Down's Syndrome]*. Nader and the boys were standing around on the street corner waiting for a cab. Nader's friend, Kami, started messing around with Bijan and swiped Bijan's baseball hat off his head. Once Nader realized what happened, he started hitting Kami and proceeded to pull off one of Kami's shoes and throw it in the dumpster situated near them. Seeing this, another friend, Sohrab, picked Kami up and started carrying him to the dumpster, threatening to throw him in. The next day, when their friend, Hassan, asked what happened, Nader stated calmly: "Kami made a moral error."

Poor youth, when defining uprightness, almost consistently discriminate between two types of people at the bottom. One category consists of people like them who, though

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[80] In Iran, as in other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, consanguine marriages between cousins – both cross-cousin marriages (marriage with a cousin from a parent's opposite-sexed sibling) and those between parallel cousins (marriage with a cousin from a parent's same-sex sibling)– are both lawful and commonly practiced among individuals in all social classes. Kin marriages in the MENA have been widely documented (see Holy 1989; Hoodfar 1997; Khuri 1970; Singerman 1995; Rugh 1984; Teebi and Farag 1997).

in economic deprivation, are morally "clean" and earn money by working hard. The other is of people who are lazy and earn their money by stealing and hustling.[81] These people are *kesafat* or morally "dirty" and poor youth – as well as their communities – consider it wrong to help them. As one young bazaar vendor stated, "I know a family who's in need, but it's better not to help them because they'll spend all the help that they get on cigarettes and bad things like that."

Poor young people's desire to be upright is consistent with their general worldview that purity is central to maintaining one's honor in the community. Even if a person comes up short in the other aspirational dimensions, he will have preserved his *aberou* as long as his community of peers, acquaintances and kin judge him as a morally decent human being. Further still, the more "good" he is perceived to be, the more respect he will accrue regardless of his job, finances, education or marriage. As such, poor youth see uprightness as the most important goal that an individual can strive for. An example is Hoda, a poor twenty-two- year-old apprentice to a salon owner in Sari. While she strives to have material goods that she can use to hold her head up high in the community, she still sees uprightness as her most important life goal:

> "Wealth and those types of things aren't that important. I want to be someone good so that when I die, people think I'm good. I had a relative who died. When people heard about his death, they were all rushing to bury him. I don't want to end up like that…."

Family

Finally, closely related to the desire to be upright is the desire to provide for one's family. Married poor young men and women with children express a strong urge to take care of their children, while poor single youth often communicate a desire to provide for their nuclear and extended families. Maintaining one's family is synonymous with preserving its integrity. Indeed, for a poor young man or woman, personal success means little if they cannot "share the wealth" with a larger family unit. The following excerpts from my fieldnotes are representative:

> *[Eighteen-year-old Hossein and his cousin, Mahmoud, rent out a small store in the local bazaar where they sell men's clothing.]* The boys were talking about going abroad to work and to earn money because they heard that factories in countries like Turkey pay much higher wages than those in Iran. Hossein, though, was adamant that he would never live abroad permanently: "You're all alone abroad. So what? You're going to make all that money and you're all by yourself?!...[The most important goal for me besides making money] is being close to my family."

> *[Sam is in his twenties and works in the same bazaar as Hossein]:* I have eight brothers and sisters. One of my brothers is in Germany. I was supposed to go too, but I didn't want to go abroad. I like my life here, I'm content here. Why? Because of loyalty to my parents, I can't just leave them.

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[81] These sentiments of lower-class youth in Iran mirror those of lower-class Americans who distinguish between people who are poor, but morally and physically "clean" and those who are poor, but "not clean" in either respect (Coleman and Rainwater: 1978).

These young men's articulation of the importance of family not only represents their view of their own responsibilities towards their households, but also reflects how the family unit shapes particular norms of "goodness" that poor youth consider to serve as the basis for preserving their own virtue. As Mahmoud pointed out, "I want to have a good family. If my parental family is good, then my own [future] family will be good, too." An underlying commitment to advancing the interests of one's family is thus considered to be mutually beneficial. Not only does it preserve the integrity of the family, but it also protects the poor young person's own *aberou*, enabling him to become an esteemed member of his community. Since having a virtuous family is a reflection of one's own honor (see Chapter 1), then by ensuring the "goodness" of his future wife and children, Mahmoud simultaneously secures his image as an honorable (*aberou-mand*) provider.

Having an admired position within one's own immediate family immediately secures the poor young person's integrity in his social circle, which is comprised of extended family members and peers. The young newlywed who chooses to live with his ailing parents in order to take care of them, the young woman who does not associate with non-*mahram* males or the young man who works hard to earn a decent wage in the informal market to provide for his children are all abiding by the principles of the honor code and/or the Muslim work ethic. As such, they become esteemed members of their own immediate families. Since news of their virtuosity travels as families visit with one another and with neighbors, and as guests come to their homes, these youths' position as honorable members of the community is also secured. Alternatively, if poor youth do not abide by these moral principles, they may suffer from critical opprobrium, as the following example illustrates:

> Unlike most girls her age here in Sari, sixteen-year-old Yas Ansari neither wears makeup nor has her eyebrows threaded. "I don't want to, I go to the *roosta [village]* a lot [to visit aunts and uncles] and it wouldn't be good for me to do those things because then they'll talk about me behind my back. Like I would never go there wearing these shoes! [pointing to the heeled shoes she had on]. At that moment, Yas' cousin, Hoda, exclaimed, "Have you seen Yas' sister?! She looks like a married woman with all that makeup she wears!"

> Yas' sister, Naz, is somewhat (in)famous among her extended family not just for her makeup style, but also for her liberality. Naz dates frequently and goes out with her friends daily, often sleeping over at her friends' homes. While seemingly mundane, these activities affected her marriage prospects and compromised her position within the larger family as a "good", decent girl. At one point, Naz started dating a paternal cousin – a relationship that her aunts and uncles strongly disapproved of: "When Auntie found out that Mo (the paternal cousin) had started up a relationship with one of the Ansari sisters", Yas stated, "she became really happy because she thought it was me that he was going out with. When she found out it was Naz, she got really upset."

ASPIRATIONS, THE MIDDLE CLASS, AND THE PURSUIT OF THE DREAM

Here, one may legitimately ask: what is the difference between the aspirations of these poor young people and those of their middle-class counterparts? It is important to understand that the aspirations of poor youth in Tehran and Sari are not propelled by a

desire to reject dominant middle-class ideals of what it means to be an upwardly mobile individual in Iran. Unlike the working-class lads of Willis' (1977) study or MacLeod's (1987) lower-class Hallway Hangers, poor youth in Iran ambitiously pursue the dreams of the Iranian middle-class. Indeed, both poor and middle-class young people alike share hopes to be "good" individuals and to attain well-paying jobs, extensive networks, higher education and a good marriage. What differentiates poor young men and women from the non-poor in Iran, however, is that poor youth approach their aspirations largely in an attempt to preserve their social honor whereas their middle-class counterparts approach their goals mainly in an effort to increase their prestige. This does not mean that middle-class youth do not care about losing their *aberou* or that poor youth do not aspire to increase their standing within the community. Rather, the concerns of the middle-class lie more in maximizing their prestige while saving face is the more salient concern of their lower-class counterparts. Though subtle, this difference is significant for it reveals that when aspirations about the good life are viewed mainly from the perspective of honor they operate according to a different logic from what they do when they are approached from the standpoint of prestige.

Too often, this distinction has been blurred, as scholars view the quest for honor as parallel to the quest for respect (see, for instance, Abu-Lughod 1985; Barkow 1975; Hatch 1989; Singerman 1995). Studies of the honor system in the Middle East frequently describe efforts to "accrue" honor as an unequivocally shared trait of individuals from all economic classes in the Middle East. This view, however, rests on a mistaken assumption about the motivations behind honor and prestige systems and therefore about the way they work. As I discussed in Chapter 1, whereas one can acquire respect or prestige, one can only preserve or lose his honor. Once *aberou* is lost, it can never be regained. Alternatively, prestige can constantly be lost, regained and accrued throughout an individual's lifetime. An individual's material goods such as his amount of wealth and his non-material characteristics such as his ability to gain a higher education can simultaneously function to increase the respect that others confer upon him as well as enable him to preserve his *aberou.*

It is important to realize, though, that among lower-class youth, strivings for material and non-material goods operate first and foremost to help secure their position as honorable members of the community. Precisely because the poor have little in terms of economic capital to conceal shortcomings before the public judgment, they're much more vulnerable to affronts to their honor. The driving force behind their aspirations thus becomes to preserve their reputation and *aberou* before the public gaze. For instance, while Yas wanted to marry an upper-middle-class, classy (*ba* kelas), cultural/learned (*farhangi*) man, she acknowledged that the option of hypergamy (marrying up) was not open to girls like her. As Yas stated, "those types of men don't want lower-class women like us." Yas ended up choosing to marry a first cousin who had little education, but who – due to his moral purity and ability to hold down a steady job which was indicative of his hard work ethic – would help her preserve her image within her extended family as an honorable girl. For young women like Yas, one cannot afford to be too selective in her choice of a spouse and consequently, one should settle down once she has found a "good" man. In a similar vein, poor young men, who often have to serve as the primary bread-winners of their families, have aspirations for decent jobs, but frequently cannot take up higher status, less paying jobs without the risk of falling into even greater poverty. One

poor young informal laborer in Tehran, for instance, had to take care of his four sisters and one younger brother in addition to securing the costs required for him to get married to a young woman whom he fancied. "I want to have a house, a good job, there's a girl I want", he recounted. "If I had the money, I would leave this job, but *nemishe* [it's not possible]." For these young men, working in better paying but lower status jobs became their way of, as Qasim stated in Chapter 1, "not coming up short economically" before one's community of peers.

On the other hand, middle-class youth, by virtue of already possessing resources including money, knowledge, skills and connections, can *afford* to be less concerned with affronts to their honor, and focus primarily on seeking material and non-material goods in an effort to increase their standing among their peers. In this regard, middle-class youth act much like calculating prestige seekers,[82] choosing to strive after particular courses of action that will maximize the respect and admiration that they accrue from others. For instance, while young, middle-class women also want to marry "good" men, they are much more discriminating in their preferences, frequently avoiding committing themselves to marrying the first "good" man that comes along, preferring instead to wait for a good and classy man who can simultaneously help the young women raise her prestige among her peers. One young, 24-year-old upper-middle class woman in Tehran, Hanna, commented on how her soon-to-be fiancé was both good *and* classy:

> *[Hanna recounted the following while she was in an upscale coffee shop in Tehran with two friends]:* The guys who come here are all *ba kelas. Ba kelas* people don't make their hair spike up and all that stuff. They tend to be more intellectual, they read books, they're well-mannered….My boyfriend is studying abroad in England. He's getting his Master's there, in Binghamton. We're going to get married once he's done with his degree….my boyfriend hasn't ever cheated on me and I can trust him.

Similarly, unlike their poor counterparts, young middle-class men, too, can afford to be selective. Take the case of 27-year-old Ibrahim. Ibrahim was a university student in Tehran from a solidly middle-class family. Already in pursuit of one of his goals – higher education – Ibrahim's main concern centered on securing a decent, well-paying job upon graduation. For Ibrahim, a well-paying job equaled a white-collar position in the capital city. Indeed, Ibrahim was unwilling to move back to his small, nondescript town where he could have earned a higher income by working in the bazaar and living with his family. Instead, he preferred to live in the capital, where he frequently sought work in higher-ranking jobs that paid on commission and where he could establish friendships with *"kale gondeh"* (big gun) industry people. Ibrahim frequently sought to foster networks with influential individuals, enabling him to raise his standing among his friends. "I got this amazing job in an engineering firm in uptown Tehran…you should just see the interior design of the place, it's amazing…I made friends with this hot shot engineer there", Ibrahim typically boasted to his friends whenever he managed to attain relatively high-status occupations.

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[82]Scholars have defined the calculating prestige seeker as a rationally calculating human agent whose goal is to maximize his prestige (see Hatch 1975; Malinowski 1959; Leach 1954; Homans 1961; Goode 1978).

THE SOURCES OF POOR YOUTHS′ ASPIRATIONS

Poor youths' material and non-material aspirations originate from five distinct sources. First, and most obviously, there are those values that are associated with the Muslim work ethic and the moral code of honor into which these young people have been socialized. It is important here to note that the Muslim work ethic exerts its effects on individual aspirations much more discretely than the code of honor in that the work ethic motivates youth to place effort in order to attain money or some form of higher education, which in turn are seen to secure the youth's *aberou* and enhance his status. The work ethic consequently constitutes the "means" by which poor youth can espouse the "end" of honor and social standing. Moreover still, as the aspirations articulated above demonstrate, both codes of honor and work can apply simultaneously in the same setting. Unlike similar moral systems in other cultural contexts,[83] the code of honor does not simply apply to situations within the family nor does the Muslim work ethic solely structure life within the school or on the job. The two codes are inextricably linked in every setting. For instance, aspirations to provide for one's family or to gain material resources reflect the value that poor youth place on autonomy. They, in turn, know that they cannot realize any of these aspirations unless they commit themselves to working. As one 16-year-old man in Sari stated, "You have to study so you can be someone. A person has to work [to be successful], God just doesn't help you [if you don't work]."

The second source of poor young men and womens' aspirations is the desire to avoid the hardships and struggles that have surrounded them since a young age. Poor young individuals express frustration with their parents' inability to secure a more comfortable life for them when they were growing up, and see it as their mission to live a different life and to have a different life for their children:

> [*28-year-old Zari is a seamstress in Sari while her husband is a karegar (laborer)*]: I want both my husband and I to work hard so that our children can have the sort of life that we never had growing up. Because I don't want my children to suffer the same economic hardships that I did as a child.

> [*17-year-old Amin works as a laborer on a chicken farm on the outskirts of Sari]:* My goal is to live well [*here, Amin means he wants to become economically well off]* and not have a life like my father's.

At the same time, poor youth are also keenly aware of the sacrifices their parents made and the hardships they endured in order to raise them and believe that it is their duty to "return the favor." Striving to be righteous and to earn money, for instance, are ways in which they can make up for their parents' hard work. The comments of 16-year-old Hamid, the son of an informal laborer in Sari, provide a good example of this outlook:

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[83] Horowitz (1983), for instance, found that a moral code of honor and commitment to the American dream structure the everyday lives of a Chicano community in the United States. However, the two codes apply to specific settings, with the code of honor generally applicable to the street and the home while the code of the American dream applicable to the school, outside the community and on the job. Furthermore, Horowitz argues that a code that is highly valued in one setting is degraded in another. However, among the poor young men and women I knew, both the code of honor and that of work were highly valued in all social settings.

Listen to the advice of your parents and others older than you. Don't do bad things like stealing, doing drugs. Study hard and work until you can, with these things, make up for your parents' hard effort. You need to be your parents' hand, *komak konandeshoon bashi [be their helper]*. And think about the efforts that your mother made for you.

The third source of poor youths' (material) aspirations arises from their disenchantment with formal institutions to provide for their wants. Poor young men and women repeatedly voiced the theme that one needs connections to make it, and that one should not completely bank on the formal educational or labor market systems to fulfill his economic needs. Because the logic of the economic system in Iran promotes the proliferation of one's networks in order to attain elements of the "good life", many poor youth find it difficult – if not impossible – to secure jobs or to advance without an extensive web of personal ties. The poor young man who may be university-educated, but has not been able to develop a corresponding network of connections that may help him to circumvent bureaucracy and secure a well-paying job, may be more socio-economically disadvantaged than his high-school educated counterpart with an extensive network of (relatively powerful) friends and acquaintances.[84] In their quest for advancement then, poor youth have come to accept the premise that it is "who they know" rather than higher education *perse* that leads to higher labor market returns. They observe peers who have succeeded in attaining a college education, but who have failed in landing a decent job and as a result, become disillusioned with the ability of the educational system to provide greater economic security. The views of sixteen-year-old Mohammad, an informal laborer in Tehran, are representative:

> [*Mohammad dropped out of school after seventh grade to work for his uncle in his home goods store and to join the bazaari[85] crowd.*] "What's the point of going to college", [he stated matter of factly with a smile.] "My cousin went to college and now he's doing the same thing I'm doing. I just want to keep doing what I'm doing and advance [economically]."

Similarly, poor young people's aspirations for well-paying jobs – without high regard to the job's standing in mainstream society – partly originates in these youths' disillusionment with formal labor market opportunities to provide high wages. Poor youth have a general conception – often, based on personal experience (see Chapter 1) – that work in the formal economy will yield lower wages than work in the informal sector. As a result, in aspiring to attain his desired wealth, the poor young individual will often direct his ambitions toward what he perceives to be more lucrative jobs in the informal economy as his primary source of income.

The fourth source of poor youths' aspirations is their interactions with those whom they consider their peers. There are two distinct reasons that these youth turn to the

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[84] This lends ethnographic support to Salehi-Isfahani and Egels' (2010) finding that there is a direct positive relationship between unemployment rates among young men in Iran and their educational level.

[85] A commonly used phrase in Iran, *bazaari* refers to those individuals who work in the bazaar.

experiences of these close others when deciding to pursue certain career ambitions at the cost of others.

The first is perceived immobility. Many poor young individuals have come to believe that it is improbable they will be able to "make it" by simply gaining more education and/or working in the formal sector. The failure of college-educated family members and friends to gain greater economic mobility and poor youths' own experiences in the formal labor market disillusions these young men and women, causing them to believe there is no hope for them to advance within the broader economic system in which they find themselves. As one seventeen-year-old informal laborer in Tehran stated, "*Kar dari, aghebati nadari [You have work, but you don't have a future]*." Subsequently, youth come to aspire to the career choices of those individuals who experienced similar economic situations as themselves, but who have since managed to move out of poverty. Often, these individuals with similar experiences are entrepreneurs in the informal economy who run their own small businesses. The following examples are representative:

> *[Kami is 15 years old and the son of a welder in Sari]:* I'm just going to buy an 18-wheeler [truck]. I know this guy who did and now he's a millionaire! [*Here, Kami means that he will buy a truck and start his own business by transporting goods.*]

> *[17-year-old Mohammad who work as a vendor in Tehran's metro station selling random small goods]:* I met this guy in the metro station who sells toothbrushes and tissues and these sorts of things and he said that *dast foroushi* (vending) makes good money and I decided to try it out. We [my wife and I] bought all this stuff for 20,000-30000 tomans (approximately 20-30 USD)…we work in shifts selling.

The second reason relates to their starting disadvantage. Those poor youth who draw their aspirations from the mobility experiences of others like them understand that they [youth] are economically disadvantaged from the outset. They believe that overcoming this initial disadvantage, in turn, requires hard work. Looking to the experiences of those who were able to overcome similar situations provides these youth with an example to aspire to. Indeed, while young people want to be members of the middle class (and often, the upper class), the gap between where they want to be and where they currently are is simply too huge for them to cross by simply emulating the behaviors of the middle class.[86] Poor youth know that in order to attain mobility out of poverty, they must take incremental steps up the mobility ladder. The lives of the working class provide them with the just blueprint for doing so. The comments of Amin are representative:

> Rich kids? *Bi khiyale donya [they don't have a care in the world]!* [I knew a] few rich kids [in my school] whose *vazn [economic level]* was *tup [up there]*. Every recess, they

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[86] Sanchez-Jankowski (1999) was the first to theorize and empirically demonstrate that the poor mimic the working class more than the middle class because the lives and achievements of the middle class are simply too far away for the poor to get. Ray (2002) builds on this concept with his idea of the "aspirations window", which is formed from an individual's zone of similar or attainable others. In this view, individuals use the experiences of their peers or near-peers to form their aspirations and behaviors.

would eat four sandwiches at a time! And they always had new clothes on….My personal role model is this electrician I worked for when I was in 6th grade. He worked really, really hard and now he has a car, several two-story houses and his *vaziyat [economic situation]* is *tupe tup [really, really up there]*!...I want to save money [so that I can become rich]…and I work really hard.

The fifth and final source of poor youths' aspirations is their satisfaction with their present conditions. One may reasonably ask: Why do youth like Amin not aspire to anything more than blue-collar jobs? The answer is that many poor youth who work in the informal economy desire blue-collar jobs not only because they observe others like themselves who have managed to carve a relatively comfortable life from similar conditions, but more importantly, because the youth themselves have established a meaningful life under the same circumstances – a life with which they are content. These young individuals value the money they earn, the ease of their jobs, and the camaraderie they have found. The following examples are illustrative:

> *[Amin]:…* A lot of people say to themselves that they want to be the boss and a lot of workers around here say that they want to open up their own chicken farming business, but I think that's stupid. As a laborer, I have my own money and I don't have to deal with making profits or selling or stuff like that.

> *[21-year-old Leila is an apprentice to a bakery store owner in Sari]:* I've been working here for the past year from morning till night. I make 110,000 tomans *[approximately, 100 USD]* a month…. That's good pay! I used to work in a beauty supply store and the lady only gave me 60,000 tomans a month…the owner's daughter here treats me like a sister even though I'm an apprentice, and they invite me to dinner at their house.

There are some poor youth who are not completely content with their present conditions, but are afraid that changing their existing circumstances might make their socio-economic situation worse rather than better. While some may think that this is the result of an irrational fear, this assessment would not be accurate. Rather, these youths' decision to remain in the informal economy results from a risk-reward calculus. Poor working youth attempt to calculate the risk factors involved in undertaking a new – and more prestigious – economic venture (e.g. starting their own business). They measure the risk that such a venture would pose to their current financial situation and soon discover that risk tends to increase the more enterprising the venture becomes. These youth subsequently become unwilling to assume the risks needed to secure their particular financial objectives. The views of Hoda are representative:

> We don't have the money to open up a salon…if we take out a loan, we have to repay it and I don't know whether the salon will take off or not. The women around me say 'I can pluck my own eyebrows instead of going to a salon' and this and that *[here Hoda is giving a reason why a salon won't take off were she to open one.]*

MORALS AND MOBILITY

The fact that most poor young men and women have both material and non-material aspirations presents them with a potential ethical paradox. On the one hand, their aspirations for wealth, higher education and connections both preserves their *aberou* and

strengthens their position within their communities. On the other hand, they recognize that their quests for advancement in these realms can involve moral transgressions, which can also inflict a blow to their honor. For instance, in order to make more money, some shop apprentices face the option of stealing from the shop coffers when their bosses are not looking. Others have to make the choice between making an honest sale and making a profitable one where they intentionally quote customers exorbitantly high prices. How do poor young individuals make this tradeoff? When striving to gain socio-economic success, how do they justify potential lapses in the moral code of purity? For some poor youth, moral transgression reflects their belief that everyone commits wrongdoing and that such moral indiscretion is even sanctioned by authority figures. In this view, transgression is a pre-requisite to achieving certain ends. This outlook makes these youth feel that they are exempt from moral restrictions on mobility-oriented actions. Consider the following excerpt from my fieldnotes:

> *[Nader]:* Everyone cheats! If you don't cheat, there's something wrong.
> *[Researcher]:* In what way?
> *[N]:* Because then you won't get good grades.
> *[Nader's friend Majid]:* One of my teachers was saying that if you can get away with cheating in his class, then we would all get a perfect 20/20. And everyone cheated! We all ended up acing the class!

Other poor youth justify their moral transgressions by relying on the notion of divine determinism. Youth who adopt this outlook believe that the Qur'an states that there is always a possibility for humans to commit moral wrongdoings. When attempting to gain economic mobility, poor youth see this as a form of divine reprieve from the occasional moral lapse. These individuals use the notion of divine determinism to rationalize the failure of their moral transgressions to bring about desired economic ends. In this outlook, the will of the "divine" ultimately determines whether or not one's decision to give priority to economic advancement over moral piety will, in fact, allow them to secure a particular financial objective. The comments of Qasim are representative:

> I believe in both God and in prayer, but *ba hesabim dige [here, Qasim means that despite these beliefs, he still commits offenses].* They [those who commit indiscretions] say, *jaezal khata [part of the Arabic quote from the Qur'an stating that human beings have the potential to sin].* …I [also] say human beings can commit wrongdoing. But that doesn't mean they can do anything they want. Me, myself, I commit wrongdoing most of the time. [For instance], I was supposed to take a motorcycle up north and the price I quoted the guy was way too high. He told me that we would go at ten in the morning. He agreed to it. If it were my destiny, that money would have been my *roozi [loosely, an earning believed to be from God]* for today. But because it wasn't my destiny, the guy didn't come today, and he might not come tomorrow either.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research on the urban poor has more often than not understood aspirations to be a direct response to structural determinants. In this view, poor young men and women unequivocally hold lower aspirations than their middle- or upper-class counterparts because of perceived societal constraints to mobility. While knowledge of the objective

opportunity structure does play a pivotal role in shaping these young people's attitudes and choices for the future, they are not the only factors or even the most important factors. Rather, the moral codes of honor and work into which these youth have been socialized, their interactions with peers, and the meanings that they attach to their current or previous social positionings all operate to influence their ideas of what constitutes the good life. These ideas, in turn, are significant not because they reflect poor youths' rejection or acceptance of the dominant ideological order outside their impoverished situation, as much scholarship on the aspirations of the urban poor have argued, but because of what these ideas imply for the well-being of the poor young person. Aspirations for the good life possess an autonomous capacity for creating meaning in the poor young person's everyday life. These material and non-material aspirations expressed by these youth involve a rather complicated set of cultural trade-offs, such as when the poor youth must decide whether to pursue his desire to be an upstanding citizen and face potential economic downfall or to pursue his desire for money and engage in deceit. Choosing to stay close to one's family members because of the value that one places on providing for one's family at the cost of pursuing a promising career path in a distant city is yet another trade-off that these youth face. Here again, researchers who fail to disaggregate the seemingly leveled desires of the poor have generally misunderstood the nature of aspirations among poor individuals and how they can contribute to perpetuating cycles of poverty all the while operating to keep the poor young person content.

CHAPTER 4

STRATEGIES: MAKING ENDS MEET, GETTING AHEAD

In Chapter 2, I identified the material and non-material aspirations of poor young people in Sari and Tehran. This chapter addresses the question of what these poor youth do with these disparate aspirations to transform them into realities – namely, strategies[87] to escape poverty. Embedded in these strategies lie poor young men's and women's idea that they have it within their power to achieve some form of socio-economic mobility and thereby to escape poverty. As one 16-year-old man said, "I work a lot … and save money. Saving money is really good because you'll end up becoming rich. I want to buy a house soon, buy a car, get a wife and throw a big wedding with a dinner." Several studies, however, have questioned this archetype of individual economic self-determination. Many external situations are considered to potentially trap the poor individual in poverty. Among these external sources of poverty, scholars have allocated primary roles to social and economic institutions including geography (Briggs 2005; Fawaz 2008; Harris and Wahba 2002; Keydar 2005; Marques 2012; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987; Sampson and Morenoff 1997), formal labor market rigidity (Carnoy 2002; Garcia and Fares 2008; Salehi-Isfahani 2010) and social customs such as reciprocal kin systems (Akerlof 1976; Hoff and Sen 2006). It is also argued that internal states including the poor's aversion to risk-taking (Yesuf and Bluffstone 2009; but see Mosley 2005), fatalism (Silver 2007; Whelan 1994), and their consumption of their meager savings (Anderson 2000; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008) are instrumental mechanisms that

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[87] Crow (1989) and Morgan and Stanley (1993) provide a comprehensive analysis of the concept of strategy in sociological literature. I adopt Crow's (1989) conceptualization of strategy as a rational calculation of behavior the individual adopts that makes sense in terms of the social world in which he lives.

serve to trap youth in persistent states of poverty. This chapter explores the validity of these propositions for the everyday lived experiences of the poor young men and women of Sari and Tehran and for their attempts to gain mobility within conditions of poverty. I depict mobility in this chapter as the interaction between the initiative that the poor youth himself takes to escape poverty and move from one position to another as well as the opportunity he has to do so, "facilitated or constrained by local-level social … and economic institutions."[88]

STRATEGIES FOR MOBILITY

Although poor young men and women in Sari and Tehran are oriented toward acquiring both money and status, if they hope to gain mobility, they must act upon these interests. Therefore, poor youth are constantly coming up with ingenious economic and non-economic strategies to acquire money, material possessions and/or social standing. These strategies involve decisions concerning the accumulation, investment and consumption of monetary and in-kind resources as well as the use of prayer.

Economic Strategy: Accumulating

A great deal of attention in recent years has been focused on the ways in which economic trends have greatly intensified instances of urban informality[89] among the Middle East's urban poor. There has been a general consensus among scholars that the increasing difficulty of finding formal sector jobs in the region's current labor market environment has led to the simultaneous proliferation of a dynamic informal sector in the Middle East. In Iran, a history of public sector domination coupled with the country's large youth cohort (men and women ages 15-29 comprise 35 percent of Iran's total population) has restricted the ability of the formal sector to absorb new entrants. As a result, many segments of the country's urban poor who are denied formal employment create their own forms of cash- and resource-generating activities (see Table 1).[90] Little is known, however, about the actual characteristics of these accumulation activities since the fluid nature of informality makes it difficult to measure in national surveys and strict guidelines enforced by the national census bureau constrain access to the scarce micro-survey data that is available.[91] Nevertheless, the latest international statistics indicate that the informal sector in Iran is quite large and comprises close to 50 percent of the country's total non-agricultural employment.[92] The lack of available data on poor urban youth working in the informal sector in Iran, though, has clouded our understanding of how informal accumulation activities enable one of the country's largest demographics to

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[88] In so doing, I follow Narayan, Pritchett and Kapoor's (2009) conceptualization of mobility "largely as the interaction between two concepts: the initiative poor people take to move out of poverty and the opportunity they have to do so, facilitated or constrained by local-level social, political and economic institutions."

[89] I borrow the phrase "urban informality" from AlSayyad (2004) who uses the term to denote "social and economic processes that shape, or are manifest in, the urban built environment (28 N16).

[90] I define the informal economy as the portion of the market economy that produces goods and services that are unregulated by formal investment, industrial or government sectors and that is characterized by the small scale of its operations (10 or fewer workers).

[91] But see Bayat (1998) and Kazemi (1980).

[92] Official estimates from the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/4/49/42863997.pdf).

move forward in the face of increasing labor market rigidity and barriers to employment in the formal sector. In the following sections, I address this gap in our knowledge by discussing both how these young men and women earn money and status in the informal labor market as well as how they seek to increase their cash earnings and material resources by diversifying their informal activities through participation in community networks and in paramilitary operations.

Informal Labor Market

Poor young individuals in both Tehran and Sari are active participants in the informal labor market, focusing their activities primarily on commodities and services. In the realm of commodities, poor youth are heavily involved in petty trade, accumulating and selling assorted merchandise (see Table 1). These goods are often bought wholesale from the local bazaars and sold on the street for a profit. Most of these young vendors position themselves at strategic points in the city, particularly areas where there is heavy pedestrian and motor traffic – often busy sidewalks in major thoroughfares. These individuals frequently display their wares on pieces of cardboard, makeshift tables or on the ground over a mat or gunny bag. Other young vendors are itinerant, walking from one busy intersection to another and selling more minor goods in cardboard boxes. At times, vendors who settle in specific locations at unsanctioned times in the day have no authorized site of operation. This results in confrontations with municipal authorities and temporarily ends the operations of the young vendor who eventually resumes his retail activities at another site. In other instances, municipal authorities allocate alternative, less publicly accessible vending sites situated relatively far from busy intersections. The following example is representative:

> Usually around this time (New Year's), Qaran Street (the major thoroughfare in Sari) is swarming with street vendors. This year, though, the city has moved all the street vendors to a backstreet parking lot in Qaran. While the city is providing the vendors with covered stalls, vendors are no longer in the most customer-friendly area of the city. "It's for the best", one taxi driver recounted. "The storeowners were all complaining that they're paying rent while these guys sell the same stuff without paying anything. And they [vendors] fight with each other for spots, as if they had a *mojavez (legal permission)*. Those poor guys needed a place [to sell their goods]. And I'm not just saying this because I used to be a vendor."

Most young street vendors are males, as it is considered dishonorable for a young, Iranian woman to be seen shouting for customers and enticing passerbys with her wares on public streets. An exception is the selling of vegetables and seasonal produce in local bazaars, which are situated outside of direct public gaze and in relatively secluded spaces (frequently back alleyways). Poor young females also serve as petty traders. These individuals, however, actually produce – rather than buy – the goods they sell. Poor young women create an assorted array of merchandise at home and sell them through word of mouth to friends, neighbors and acquaintances. For instance, while most poor young men will buy magnets, plastic flowers and clothes and retail them to people on the street, some poor young women actually hand-make and market these small goods and articles of clothing directly from their homes. A representative case is a mother and daughter team in south Tehran who created homemade magnets from colored clay and glitter and sold them (at a relatively high price compared to prices in the local bazaars) to

friends and neighbors. The 15-year-old daughter would help her mother create these rather unique magnets after she came home from school and finished her homework. While sales of both hand-made and store-brought goods do not enable poor young men and women to experience upward mobility by leaps and bounds, these small enterprises are nevertheless capable of generating enough revenue to make them profitable, ongoing projects. As one young male street vendor in Tehran stated, "of course there's money in what I'm doing [selling umbrellas]. If there wasn't, am I crazy to continue doing it?"

Poor young people's accumulation strategies also include informal work in the services industry. Most informal sector services activities are concentrated in a) family businesses, b) self-employment, and c) apprenticeships, which I detail below (see also Table 1). Both young men and women participate in these activities, although females work in service jobs that are primarily outside of the public gaze as self-employed seamstresses, salon apprentices, stay-at-home entrepreneurs or domestic laborers. Rather than being an employment choice of last resort for poor young individuals, the informal services sector serves as the primary source of economic support for these youth and their families. There is a strong demand for employment in the services industries, both because the stigma of being a petty street vendor can inflict a blow to the young person's *aberou* and because poor youth find it relatively easier to gain access to these industries than to the formal labor market.

Family Businesses

Among poor youth in Sari and Tehran, the family unit does not operate simply to meet their emotional and social needs. The family also functions as an economic organization, providing employment and income for its young, less fortunate members.[93] Many poor young men and women have extended family members who are much more financially secure than the poor young individual and his immediate family. These family members – comprised frequently of uncles, but also cousins and aunts – are primarily self-employed businesspeople who have managed to join the ranks of the middle class by running some type of small business such as a gardening service or a home-goods store. As such, these family organizations provide easy opportunities for the poor young person to gain entry into the world of work. In some instances, family businesses rely on the familial ethos of mutual exchanges (see Chapter 2) to utilize unpaid family workers (particularly, youth) to fulfill a function or task. For example, one young woman in Sari would help her cousin, who was a local seamstress, to complete her job in a timelier manner by helping her to iron clothes or by making her lunch. In return, the cousin would sell custom-made *manteaus*[94] to the young woman at deeply discounted prices. Other

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[93] Singerman (1997) also found that the family serves both the affective and economic needs of working-class individuals in Egypt.

[94] Since the onset of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have been required to wear either a *chador* (a long piece of dark-colored fabric, worn wrapped around the head and upper and lower body leaving only the face exposed) or a *manteau* in public. A *manteau* is an outer garment frequently comprised of either a cotton shirtdress (worn in the warmer months) that reaches to at least mid-thigh or a trenchcoat/peacoat of the same or longer length that is worn in the winters. *Manteaus* can be any color of one's choosing, though dark colors are the norm. Frequently worn with a tight-fit by the less religiously devout segments of the population, *manteaus* are considered to be one of the most important articles of clothing in a woman's wardrobe since they are often the most visible item of clothing. As such, women of all classes spend a great deal of time and

times, poor young people receive compensation for their labor. This frequently occurs when the poor youth becomes a full-time employee of the family enterprise. In this role, the poor young person protects the family from economic insecurity and fraud – as families trust their own more than they do outsiders[95] – and the extended family unit enriches the coffers of the poor youth. After an unsuccessful job search, 20-year-old Mehran turned to a maternal cousin who employed him as a worker in his produce store in south Tehran's bazaar district. "I came to work here [at my cousin's store] because there was no work where I lived [on the outskirts of Tehran]", Mehran recalled. "And when we moved to Tehran, there was no work and no place to sleep so I came here….I sleep on the floor of the store."

Self-Employment

Many older youth (those in their late teens and twenties) who have managed to save a certain amount of cash through apprenticeships, vending or working in family enterprises opt to be their own boss and start small services ventures of their own. Female youth often operate sartorial or beauty businesses from their homes, while their male counterparts engage in various services activities ranging from sales to hauling small wares. While self-employment is considered to be the riskiest strategy for accumulating money, it is also the most profitable. Poor young people engage in much preliminary strategizing and discussion of the potential business venture with various family members, friends and acquaintances and some even undertake smaller, "pilot" projects before they make the decision to fully commit to the responsibility of starting their own services business. One poor young woman in Sari was training[96] at a local salon in order to receive her beautician's license while simultaneously operating an epilating service from her small apartment. She had converted her daughter's bedroom into her salon, her only investment being in the portable waxing bed and supplies that she would conveniently store away on their small terrace when not in use. The income she subsequently received and the business network that she came to develop with clients gave her enough knowledge about operating a small establishment that she decided to open a full-fledged salon in her mother's house two months later when she finally received her cosmetology license.[97]

Other times, self-employment requires no start-up costs or pilot tests, but simply one's religious devotion and a recognized morally upright character. One devout, poor, 28-year-old woman in Sari, for instance, would be asked by neighbors to undergo religious fasts in their stead. The young woman considered this her job, and would undertake month-long fasts in return for a small payment by her neighbors.

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energy trying to securing the latest fashionable *manteau* "look" (like designer clothing, *manteau* styles change every season).

[95] This is because family members know the young family member's lineage or *asliyat* and thus have better information to determine whether or not the young person is morally upright. If he is not, then family members will turn to morally upright outsiders who are known to them through their extended circles.

[96] This young woman did not receive money for her training (unless she received a tip from customers). Instead, she paid the salon owner approximately 200 USD to receive training.

[97] The income this young woman received was not enough to place her above the poverty line. While she did not earn enough to escape poverty, the income nevertheless enabled her to achieve incremental mobility within poverty (see Chapter 5).

Apprenticeships

The most widespread informal services jobs that poor youth in both cities engage in are apprenticeships. Young women use apprenticeships as a means to add to their wedding trousseau or to increase their own cash income in order to purchase material goods for themselves and their homes. In contrast, young men become apprentices (*shagerds*) in order to provide for their families, to make ends meet and to learn skills that will enable them to eventually start their own businesses. While the apprentice (*shagerd*) system abounds in both cities, it is also one of the most difficult services positions to gain access to (unless one becomes employed as an apprentice in a family enterprise) and often requires a good deal of networking because small business owners are unwilling to hire a young person unless they can be certain of the individual's character and moral standing. For instance, Ali, a 15-year-old from a low-income family in Sari was chosen as an apprentice in a local bookstore because his father was the store carpenter and the storeowners knew him to be a "good" man, one who was morally upright and did not steal or deceive.

The consequences of entering the apprentice system, however, are double-edged. On the one hand, apprenticeships are useful in enhancing skills and providing waged employment to an otherwise formally unemployable population. On the other hand, the system can also serve to hinder entry into more lucrative career paths[98]. Throughout the course of my fieldwork, I encountered numerous young male apprentices who were working in the same job for years.[99] Characteristics – such as their sales skills and trustworthiness – that made these youth indispensable assistants also meant that shop owners were unwilling to part with them, offering them the occasional small pay raise to entice them to continue working as their apprentices.

Gifts and Mutual Aid Networks

The second type of informal accumulation activity that poor young men and women are involved in has to do with gift-giving and mutual aid and assistance networks. Studies of low-income groups have long documented the strength and significance of informal community networks in supplementing the material and social needs of their participants[100]. These networks of reciprocity and exchange not only involve the exchange of goods and services (detailed below), but also operate to bring status and preserve the honor of members, thus differentiating them from normal market

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[98] Studies of apprenticeships in Africa have noted that long training periods and the risk of exploitation of young people as cheap labor coupled with the lack of support for apprentices to start up their own businesses are among some of the pitfalls of this otherwise significant route to real-world skills development. See International Labor Organization (ILO) (http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_104621.pdf).

[99] For females, apprenticeships are usually a more transitory period in their lives, as they are not expected to work outside the home. As a source of skills acquisition, then, apprenticeships tend to benefit more men than women (see also World Bank: http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/230070/HakimMorning%20I.pdf)

[100] The literature on reciprocity networks is vast and includes Bienen 1984; Denoeux 1993; Lomnitz 1977; Nelson 1979; Norton 2001; and Waterbury 1970.

exchanges.[101] Further still, because exchange occurs between individuals who are extensively familiar with each other and because exchange, by its very nature, assumes "continuity beyond a single transation" (Hoodfar 1997: 217), exchange networks usually occur within stable groups such as groups of kin, friends, neighbors, and/or colleagues.

Relative to work in the informal economy, participating in informal community networks is a more understated strategy for the poor young person seeking to improve his socio-economic situation. One major disadvantage of participating in reciprocity networks, which I have detailed in Chapter 2, is the cost associated with membership. Poor youth frequently have to go to great lengths – by intensifying their efforts in the labor market or by giving of their time – to reciprocate a neighbor's dinner invitation, to provide costly wedding gifts that enable them to maintain their honor or to assist a family member by doing chores and taking care of children. However, the economic and social returns of participating in such networks rival and at times, surpass, those gained by working in the informal economy. Important for the poor young person seeking to enhance his economic and social status are those informal networks that operate vertically, that is, between individuals of higher and lower socio-economic standing. The nature of reciprocity in these types of networks is necessarily asymmetrical. Vertical networks frequently occur either between employers and employees or between more and less affluent neighbors and kin. In the former case, poor young men and women whose mothers are employed as domestic maids for middle-upper class families often receive cash and in-kind material goods such as clothes, mobile phones and accessories from their maternal employers. One young 15-year-old man would receive annual gifts of expensive hand-me-down clothes, electronic goods or cash from his mother's middle-class employers. Another young woman would travel with her mother to her employer's seaside villa, where she partook in otherwise expensive recreational activities[102] free-of-charge while her mother was engaged in domestic duties in the villa. These activities not only provided the young woman social entertainment, but also functioned as opportunities for her to meet and become friends with more affluent and influential youth – including the employer's son – who enabled her to increase her standing within her own community.

Other youth, with extended family members and/or friends who were more financially secure than the young person's own nuclear family, received relatively large amounts of cash and gifts at special occasions such as birthdays, New Year's and weddings. Since cohesive kinship ties are based on a system of mutual obligations (see Chapter 2), poor youth were expected to return the generosity of family members by

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[101] In Fiske's (1993) conceptualization of the four basic forms of sociality, the relational type that most closely approximates these networks of reciprocity and exchange in Iran is equality matching (EM). As Fiske describes, equality matching is characterized by the equality of exchange over time or a balance of exchanged favours (tit-for-tat). However, the form of network exchange practiced by the young men and women in this study is slightly different from EM in that the individual who is able to successfully participate in this type of relationship (i.e. by discharging his debt) is subsequently able to add material resources to his coffers, thereby gaining prestige in the process.

[102] These activities included swimming and bike-riding. In sea-side villas in Iran, one has to pay fees (approximately 7 USD) in order to go to the seaside or to rent out bikes.

performing small chores for them such as taking care of small children or lending a helping hand around the house.

Marital contributions made by family members, particularly, held a significant role in the lives of poor, young newly-weds. A lack of financial resources (frequently on the part of the future groom) often meant a prolongation of the engagement period and a delay in marriage.[103] Once poor couples became married, their low levels of capital meant that they would have to cope with the burden of economic hardship in their marital lives. For this reason, once a marriage was agreed upon by both families, engagement and marital ceremonies were set up in order to provide opportunities for kin members, neighbors and friends to contribute gifts to the bride and groom – often cash or gold – that would partly alleviate the couple's financial burdens.

It should be mentioned here that horizontal exchange networks – those that take place between people from similar socio-economic backgrounds – were not absent among the poor youth I studied, but rather served to benefit the poor young person indirectly. In this role, reciprocal exchanges occurred when the poor young person's parents participated in a type of rotating savings and credit association[104] called *dowrehs* (literally, circles) with groups of kin, neighbors and acquaintances. These types of associations are a group of individuals who agree to meet on a regular basis (frequently, once every month) in order to save and borrow communally. While it has been argued that rotating credit associations operate as a "middle rung" in the development process that "trains" individuals to participate in more modern economic institutions such as banks and more formalized credit institutions (Geertz 1962), the persistence of *dowrehs* in contemporary urban Iran and the urban poor's preference for *dowrehs* to formal banking systems suggests that *dowrehs* are a socio-economic adaptation to conditions of poverty among the urban poor (Kurtz 1973; Singerman 1995)[105]. *Dowrehs* provide an *alternative* to participating in the national economic institutional matrix due to their

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[103] While Singerman (1995; 2001; 2007) has widely documented the rising cost of marriage in the Middle East and the consequences that it can bring to the poor young person's social and economic well-being, it should be noted that in Iran, the "engagement" is simply a euphemism for the Islamic marriage ceremony while "marriage" is the term used for the wedding reception. It is the latter that is of importance for poor youth and especially, for poor young men. Indeed, under the terms of the *aqd*, the man and wife often do not live together. Married life begins once they have been properly presented to the community as husband and wife in a relatively lavish wedding reception. Per tradition, it is the man and his family who must shoulder the cost of the wedding reception and marital abode. As such, the young man has to postpone the wedding reception until he can accumulate enough money and material resources to fulfill his obligations. The *aqd* is often a simple ceremony performed at home that requires little initial cost. There were young men and women in my study who were "engaged" for years before they were able to amass enough money to host the wedding reception.

[104] Geertz (1962) first coined the term "rotating credit association." In his view, the rotating credit society represented a "middle rung in the process of development from a largely peasant society to one in which trade plays an increasingly crucial role" (1962: 262).

[105] *Dowrehs* are also formed among middle and upper class women in urban Tehran and Sari. Among these individuals, the *dowreh* operates *alongside* their participation in formal banking and credit institutions to provide quick access to small sums of interest-free loans that are for their own personal use. Among poor women, however, the *dowreh* is often the only type of credit and saving association in which they participate in.

relative ease of membership and their flexible loan criteria (see also Ardener 1964). Indeed, *dowrehs* were ubiquitous among poor households in Iran and served as a means for poor parents to acquire relatively small-scale interest-free loans rather easily in the absence of such loans from the formal banking system.[106] Both men and women participated in *dowrehs* (although *dowrehs* were gender-specifc), whereby each member "saved" their money by contributing the same amount of money (frequently anywhere from 10 to 50 USD) at each meeting of the *dowreh* (often every month). At each meeting, the lump sum of money collected from members was given to one member of the *dowreh* who then used the interest-free loan[107] to pay for whatever they wished. The individual who received the loan during one meeting would then have to contribute her share (again, anywhere from 10 to 50 USD) to the collective pot during the next meeting. In this way, money constantly rotated between members, enabling each member to access a large sum of money to pay for household expenses during the lifetime of the *dowreh*. As one mother of a teenage boy stated, "I was in two *dowrehs* because I had to pay for my teenagers, and my husband couldn't work. There were expenses [like clothes and food] that had to be met."[108]

Poor youth themselves participate in more explicit networks of mutual aid in order to receive non-cash material goods. These networks often involve the exchange or loan of fashionable items of clothing, accessories or electronic goods and occur throughout the year. By allowing the poor youth access to rather costly material possessions, networks of exchange and loans both augment the coffers of the poor young person by enabling him to keep personal expenses to a minimum and also serve as a mechanism for him to save face in the community and thereby, live in terms of the honor code. Take the comments of Yas, whom we met in previous chapters:

> *[Here, Yas is responding to my comment about her rather numerous stylish manteaus]:* I [only] have around three or four *manteaus*, but I exchange with my sister and her friends. This one is my sister's friend's *manteau*!

Paramilitary Participation

Many regional observers have characterized poor youth in the urban Middle East as dissident. In this view, poor young people's dissidence enables them to gain power and self-respect although in a means detrimental to their own interests (Ismail 2003; Kouaouci 2004; Salehi-Isfahani 2008). The general consensus in these accounts is that economic conditions coupled with low levels of occupational opportunities engender feelings of powerlessness, especially among young men who construct their manhood, in part, in terms of their "responsibility for providing for the family" (Ismail 2003: 127). The lack of poor youths' ability to provide for themselves and their families is argued to

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[106] This is why Singerman (1995) refers to these associations as "parallel banking systems."

[107] The amount of the loan was contingent on the number of people in the *dowreh*. Thus, a *dowreh* which had 50 people who each contributed 50 USD would mean that the total loan amount would have been 2500 USD.

[108] This mother later ended her association with the *dowrehs* because she started working and could no longer be present at the *dowreh*'s monthly meetings. "They started talking about me behind my back because I wasn't showing up at the meetings. I also had so many other debts to pay that I just couldn't keep up so I ended it", she recalled.

make them more disposed to fatalism. Fatalism, in turn, is believed to have a "strong cultural affinity" (Bayat 2007: 580) to militant Islamism.

In Iran, the closest approximation to militant Islamism is the country's volunteer paramilitary organization, the *Basiij* (Mobilization for the Oppressed). Poor young people – particularly high school students – in my study tended to lend *pragmatic* support – in the form of membership – to *Basiij*. Participation in *Basiij* was largely utilized as simply another strategy to accumulate resources, thereby contributing to their central objectives of gaining money and status (see also Bayat 2007). *Basiij* membership drew its basis from poor young people's commitments to the Muslim work ethic – in particular, its emphasis on financial and academic achievement. It was not the absence of forward-looking behavior (i.e. apathy and fatalism) but rather the almost dogmatic pursuit of self-development that led these young people to become *Basijis*.

Indeed, involvement in *Basiij* provided poor youth, especially young male students, with both short and long-term economic and academic incentives. In helping to monitor internal security in Iran by engaging in various activities such as religious ceremonies and the policing of the morals of peers in their schools or communities, poor young *Basiiji*s – like Nader, Kami, Hassan and Sohrab – were able to accumulate a variety of official benefits including gym discounts, special consideration for college enrollment (thereby increasing their chances of university acceptance) and army conscription waivers. Like networks of mutual aid, these diverse and generous incentives helped poor youth to keep expenses to a minimum. Unlike other accumulation strategies, however, *Basiij* benefits – particularly the reduced army conscription time period[109] and college enrollment benefits– had the added advantage of enabling the young person to enter college and/or join the labor force much earlier than they would have been able to otherwise.

Economic Strategy: Investing

Investment begins for poor youth the moment that they start working – whether in school, in a job, or in the family – to further their socio-economic interests. The three main resources that poor young men and women invest are time, capital and contacts, which I detail below.

Time

By far the most common investment that nearly all the youth in my study made was time. Poor young men and women invest a great deal of their time in activities that they believe will augment their economic standing, preserve their *aberou* and raise their claims to the respect that is bestowed upon the *aberou-mand* individual. Here, poor youth reinforce the work ethic that every person must give of himself first if he is to expect blessings from God. Those who give of their time, energy and effort are honorable and should expect to reap the rewards of their labor. The comments of Omar are representative:

> *[Omar is a locksmith who works in his uncle's store in south Tehran]:* First of all, *Khoda roozi resoone [God himself gives blessings]*. Remember that story in our books? About the fox who didn't have any arms or legs and he was able to catch a lion? Even if a person doesn't have arms or legs, *roozish mirese [he'll get his blessings]*. But it depends on a person's own hard work and effort. You have to want it. You know, this has been proven to me. Some days, I come to the store, and a customer's here and I say to myself,

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[109] This time period consists of a few months and depends on amount of time of active duty.

ah hosle nadaram [meaning, he doesn't feel like working]. On those days, I'll only get two customers in four hours time. And then I say, *Khoda ghalat kardam [loosely: I was wrong God. Here, Omar is indicating that he asks for God's forgiveness for being lazy so that God would bring him more customers]*.

There are three realms in which poor young individuals frequently invest the majority of their time: studying, family, and working. Contrary to many studies that have argued that urban poor youth actively reject the achievement ideology of hard work in school (MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977), many of the youth in my study spent exorbitant amounts of time studying for exams, preparing lessons and negotiating grades with teachers in an effort to receive good grades. Often one of the biggest concerns of those youth who are in school is passing their "school exams." One poor young Tehrani woman, Shiva, in particularly dire economic straits after the passing of her mother, would multi-task, washing her family's laundry while studying from her textbooks. Shiva was not the only one. A diligent student, Yas, would often stay up until the early morning hours preparing for exams. The following reaction ensued after a teacher gave Yas a lower grade than she believed she deserved:

> I've gotten all 20s *[the equivalent of A+s]* except for one class. The teacher gave me an 18. It's just ridiculous! How can she just give me an 18 like that on a whim? All the other girls in the class have gotten 20s. It's all *alaki [pretend]!* My mom said that I just don't have luck. My mom went and spoke to the teacher and the teacher told my mom that I need to study more and my mom said that I study enough and that I can't study more than I do now. The teacher got quiet after that! I studied until 4:30 in the morning and then I would get up at 6:30 to study more. My mom kept saying that I need to eat…I didn't even eat…I studied so hard!

In a similar vein, poor youth give much of their daily time to family members in striving to pursue their aspirations. Poor youth use the family to provide comfort and security in their daily struggle with limited resources. While kinship culture dictates that such comfort and security comes about from filial piety and the cohesiveness of family ties (see Chapter 2), in actuality, poor youth also engage in conflicts with parents and other family members in order to stake claims to social and economic resources. There is a dichotomy between the public and private faces of the family unit, which conceals various conflicts of interest that occur against the backdrop of cooperation. Indeed, the nature of the familial ethos requires that these conflicts be shaped in a general medium of cooperation (Sen 1987; Singerman 1995), as each member has much personal and collective *aberou* to lose if he causes rifts between members of the family. As a result, the poor young person must simultaneously co-operate with family members in order to preserve his *aberou* and to ensure the family's "togetherness" as well as engage in conflicts with the same individuals in order to defend his interests, to further access resources that he believes will help him achieve his goals, or to guide the way in which he perceives the family can best represent itself in the community. The following excerpts from my fieldnotes is representative:

> *[Maryam]*: I've fought for five years to get my way. Like, for you, you're free to wear whatever color shawl or type of shoe you want, but it wasn't like that for me. I had to fight to get my right [to wear these kinds of things].

*[Nazanin is Yas' sister. Nazanin had recently gotten a nose job. The following is Yas'
explanation of how Nazanin was able to amass the rather large sum of money
(approximately 2000USD) for the surgery]:* We're building a house in the village. We
had to take out a bank loan to build the house. Nazanin told our mom that she didn't like
the village and that the house could just belong to my mom and me. Nazanin told our
mom that she didn't want the house and asked our mom why she (our mom) couldn't just
give Nazanin her share of the money from the loan so that she (Nazanin) could get
something that she actually wanted (i.e. nose job).

Of all the activities in which poor youth participate in order to secure socio-
economic gains, working constitutes the most time-consuming one. Nearly all the
working youth in my study were employed in the informal economy; a venue which
scholars have claimed is "far less governed [than the formal economy] by norms or
expectations that place a premium on discipline and regularity (Wilson 1997). However,
the poor youth I observed who worked in the informal sector were expected by their
bosses to consistently show up everyday, to work long hours (often from morning to
nightfall), and to perform well. Even those youth who were self-employed informal
workers were driven by a strict work ethic that originated from the Muslim work ethic
and that disciplined them to keep to a strict work schedule. Indeed, self-employed youth
have an even greater incentive to work hard and to work well because they have much
more to lose financially than their salaried counterparts. For those youth who have
established their own small businesses in storefronts, exorbitant monthly rents frequently
means that the young person must work twelve-hour work days to be able to afford
operating at a particular site. Other poor youth, who work as petty entrepreneurs selling
small goods on sidewalks and busy thoroughfares, face the problem of earning enough in
the day to not only meet supply costs, but to also earn enough profits to make their small
operations worthwhile. The most common solution these youth employ in order to
procure more customers is to work longer hours, often well into the night.

For those poor young men and women who have entered the world of work and
who desire to start their own businesses, much time is spent strategizing and discussing
the costs and benefits of starting the potential enterprise as well as carefully assessing the
way that near others have executed similar ventures. The most frequently cited concern
that poor youth give is their fear of failure – both on a personal and economic level, as
the following example represents:

[Maral]: I'm going to open up a salon. Remember Atoosa from the salon? She is going
to open up a salon and wants me to work with her. I'm not sure how it's going to work.
She wants to open it up in the center of the city, on Hamza Street, but we're just
beginning and there are so many salons there already *[here, Maral means that their salon
may not attract customers]*. I think it's better to open one around here in Sharif, the rent
is less expensive – it would cost around 100,000 tomans [approximately 100 USD] each.
And there are no other salons in the area. I'm supposed to get together with her around
4:30 this afternoon to talk about it. *[A few minutes later Atoosa called and Maral
suggested they open up the salon near her own neighborhood in Sharif.]* You can't rely
on Atoosa's word. She keeps jumping from one thing to another! At first, she wanted to
pay 10 million tomans [approximately 10,000 USD] security deposit so that she didn't
have to pay rent. I think her father was going to give her the money for the deposit. But

that didn't end up working. It would be really good if that happened though. But then she might just want me as an apprentice *[Maral sees this as a step down for her].*

Capital

In addition to investing their time in order to gain socio-economic rewards, poor youth must also invest the money they accumulate through their work and/or through their networks in order to provide for their families, finance future expenses such as a wedding, or to generate profits. Some poor youth are very successful in investing their money, while others – though able to invest some money – quickly consume their savings. The young people who are able to secure relatively larger savings over a longer period of time are those who work in a family enterprise or who are self-employed as small business owners. In contrast, those youth who are unable to invest large sums of money usually accumulate capital through apprenticeships,[110] petty vending or mutual aid networks. The capital they earn through these venues is comparatively so minor that youth become overwhelmed with the desire to consume their meager earnings to provide for their families, to meet expenses and/or to purchase personal items to save face in their communities.[111] The comments of Rashid, a seventeen-year-old petty vendor who sells gym clothes from a cardboard box in a local bazaar in Tehran, are representative:

> Am I able to save money at the end of the month?! There's no money left at the end of the month! *Belakhare karjo khorak hast [here Rashid means that there are miscellaneous expenses he has that have to be met with the money he earns every month.]*

Social Contacts

Poor youth must also make choices about investing other resources besides money – namely their contacts with other individuals – when attempting to secure their material aspirations. Among poor young men and women, there is a concentrated effort to invest energy in building a network of associations with people who are in a position to provide job-placement assistance, information or capital. Investing one's energy in building contacts stems from poor youths' belief that it is who they know, rather than their education, that will ultimately help them in getting what they want.[112] Nader's comments are representative:

> One of my uncles only studied until the second grade and now he is a nurse making 600,000 [approximately 600 USD] a month. He had connections. You just need connections. Nothing else matters.

In developing their network of contacts, poor youth often build associations with individuals with whom they have some prior family or personal connection. As these

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[110] Apprenticeships, however, are profitable if one works diligently in one for a long period of time. In this case, employers often provide incremental pay raises to entice the youth to stay.

[111] I found that this difference in consumption was largely due to the nature of the job that the youth had, rather than to a difference in cultural value-orientations (see Sanchez-Jankowksi 2008).

[112] This corroborates Sanchez-Jankowski's (1991) finding that low-income individuals in the United States believe that it is who a person knows, rather than what they know, that will help him get ahead in life.

individuals often know the moral standing and character of the poor young person and/or his family, they are much more willing to extend assistance to the youth as compared to a formal organization or very powerful individual who has no prior knowledge of the young person or his "lineage." These other individuals usually consist of family friends, employers, colleagues, neighbors, or even extended family members with a wide range of contacts. Having connections, however, does not always guarantee benefits. A poor youth's contacts often face the dilemma of deciding whom – among the many individuals that they know – to give a particular job. Given the strong competition that exists for certain positions, the poor youth must "prove himself" to his contact in order to be deemed worthy of the job and/or to maintain the position. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes is representative:

> Saba was the right-hand woman in the salon where Afsaneh is currently apprenticing for the owner. Afsaneh became close friends with Saba while they were both at the salon. Recently, Saba opened her own salon and hired Afsaneh to be the salon's eyebrow threader. Not too long ago, Saba kicked Afsaneh out because Afsaneh was acting up. A mutual friend of both girls told me that she had warned Saba that she wouldn't be able to work well with Afsaneh (because of Afsaneh's attitude).

Economic Strategy: Consuming

Nearly all the economic strategies that poor youth undertake are for the purpose of funding consumption both in the immediate present and in the distant future. By consuming the capital that they accumulate and invest, poor youth come full circle: they are able to provide for their families, finance a wedding or buy material goods that will help them save face in their communities and enjoy life. At the same time, the moment poor young men and women consume their capital, they must once again start the arduous process of accumulating and investing in order to finance future consumption and thus safeguard their image from intimations of dishonor.[113]

Consumption frequently takes three forms: material goods, recreation, and assistance. In the first category, clothes, accessories, electronic goods, jewelry, home furnishings, property and/or vehicles are the items most often purchased by poor young men and women. The purpose of purchasing these items, however, varies: clothes, accessories, jewelry and electronic goods are often used to secure a particular self-image intended for public scrutiny; property (land, homes, stalls, storefronts) and vehicles (motorcycles, trucks, cars) are frequently used to satisfy the financial requirements that a groom must assume before being deemed worthy of marriage or to generate an income in

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[113] A point that comes up here is whether there is honor in not spending money on commodities that are for show alone. Since items bought simply to maintain appearances imply to the young person's public that he/she has the money to make relatively costly purchases, there is no dishonor that comes about spending money that one does not have. Furthermore, having commodities to preserve one's appearances do not necessarily imply that the individual has spent any money. Indeed, the individual may receive material goods as gifts. For instance, one poor family in Sari received a continuous flow of cash gifts and material goods such as various household items from better-off family members that enabled them to save face when guests came into their home. Rather than question how the family was able to purchase these items, guests who left their home would state how much better off the family was than themselves.

order to provide for one's family; finally, home furnishings are purchased in order to build up the required wedding trousseau or *jahaz* of a future bride.

Recreational activities or *tafri* are a significant feature of poor youths' social lives. However, poor young individuals believe that being able to have *del khoshi* (fun) only comes when one has money to spend. As one young bazaar worker in Sari stated: "If your pockets are empty, what *tafri* do you have?" To this end, once poor youth have accumulated a certain amount of capital, they often do not hesitate to spend a fair amount on items that will enable them to enjoy life. Some young women, like Yas, spend gifts of cash they receive on financing dance classes while others spend their savings to hang out with friends at various bazaars and shopping centers. There were other young men and women in both cities who travel many miles to the various parks and mountains surrounding Sari and Tehran for picnics or group get-togethers, where they purchase and consume food items.

Lastly, poor youth – especially unmarried males – allocate money to assist immediate family members. Time and time again, I encountered poor, working young men, who worked in order to supplement the household income and/or to help their mothers with expenses in the wake of a father's death or illness. For instance, one 20-year-old man, Shervin, started working as a bellhop in a hotel in Tehran immediately after graduating from high school because there was "no other way" to support his parents, contribute to the household budget and accumulate enough money to get married. Young men like Shervin often served as the primary breadwinners of their families and often had to balance their desires to accumulate enough capital in order to start their own households with the necessity of giving away their earnings to support the well-being of their nuclear families.

Non-Economic Strategy: Praying

Finally, poor youth use prayer as a strategy to realize their aspirations. Unlike economic tactics, which are used solely to achieve material ends, prayer has the added advantage of helping the poor young person to fulfill non-material wants as well. Those poor youth who use praying as a strategy often seek divine assistance – in the form of a ritualistic prayer, mosque attendance, saint worship, *nazrs* (ceremonial gifts to God or spiritual vow), fasting or utterances – to secure a good husband, ensure the virtue of themselves and their families, and finally, to gain assistance with more tangible ends such as obtaining good grades and winning economic gains. An example is Yas who – though hard-working – also relies on prayer to attain academic achievement. This is related to poor youths' idea that prayer along with effort more effectively conjures divine blessings.

> Yas and I headed into the cemetery, where she led me to the gravesite of a young man. "If you make a wish, he makes it come true", Yas stated. She told me how she would often wish to receive a good score on an exam and how whenever she made a wish to him, it would come true. Yas leaned over his gravesite, tapped his grave twice and recited a few prayers. Yas was not the only one who believed in the miraculous nature of the young man. A group of women were also there, lighting candles and calling out his name.

FACTORS INFLUENCING MOBILITY STRATEGIES

Poor young people in Sari and Tehran, then, come up with fairly developed economic and non-economic strategies to get what they want. The strategies that poor

young men and women employ, however, are influenced by a set of factors – detailed below – that determine how successful they will be in securing their goals.

Geography

　　How the spatial concentration of poverty exerts its effects on individuals has become an important – though relatively scarce – question in the urban sociological literature in recent years. While numerous studies – dating back to discussions of poverty and ethnic spatial concentration by the Chicago School of urban sociology in the 1920s – have shown that neighborhood poverty does independently affect outcomes such as health and teen behavior (Brooks-Gunn et al 1997; Jargowsky 1997; Katz et al 2001; Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley 2002), fewer studies have been able to show precisely *how* the spatial concentration of poverty produces these effects.

　　To be sure, Wilson's (1987) work, which explicitly hypothesizes that living in a poor neighborhood negatively affects a person's life chances through the lack of good role models and greater social isolation, has become a touchstone in subsequent sociological studies that have argued that the negative effects of spatial poverty can be explained on the basis of the role played by factors such as good role models (Cutler and Glaeser 1997), reduced social control (Sampson and Groves 1989), peer effects (Durlauf 2006), cultural frames (Small 2004), and territorial stigma (Auyero 2009; Wacquant 2008). Two broad and inter-related assumptions in all of these debates has been that 1) segregated, poor individuals tend to have worse outcomes because they have fewer connections to other socio-economic groups and 2) many individuals who live in segregated poor areas are poor.[114]

　　To be sure, whether or not poor youth reside in Sari or Tehran influences their exposure to working and middle-class individuals[115] who are in a position to provide job placement assistance, information and/or capital. Stark differences in the urban morphologies of Sari and Tehran play a contributing role in influencing the types of individuals with whom poor youth come into contact with on a daily basis and from whom they gain information. While class differences in Sari are largely not spatially demarcated, Tehran is comprised of three geographically separated, class-divergent regions with upper-, middle- and lower-class residents distinctively clustered in north, central and south Tehran, respectively (see Figures 1 and 2). Due to the highly integrated nature of Sari, poor young Saravis have greater associational opportunities to form ties with middle class society and thus, greater access to information, goods and opportunities in general than do poor Tehrani youth. Indeed, poor youth in Sari rub shoulders with the

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[114] See Fischer et al (1996) who argue that the social geography of the poor have an impact on their chances to be mobile.

[115] Sanchez-Jankowski (1999) found that working class people exert more effects on the poor than the middle class in that the working class help the poor find employment, provide them with access to material goods and role models and generally improve their lives. Sanchez-Jankowski empirically demonstrates that the poor turn to the experiences of the working class because the working class were "closer" to the poor than the middle class. In this context, the working class had jobs that required skills that were closer to what the poor had. However, in his depiction of the "working class" and the "poor", Sanchez-Jankowski does not make it clear whether they consist of the working poor and the non-working poor, respectively. The poor youth in this study consist of both the employed and unemployed poor – individuals whose individual or familial wages fall below the poverty line.

upper echelons of Saravi society in schools, in the bazaars, or in various neighborhoods on a daily basis. These interactions present poor young Saravi men and women with the opportunity to not only keep up to date with the latest fashion and social trends, but to also gain information about potential jobs and to participate in social circles that they otherwise would not have had the chance to engage in. The ability of Golnar, a young woman from a poor family in Sari, to interact with middle- and upper-middle class professionals in the city is representative:

> Today, Golnar and I were leaving the bookstore on Qaran Street [Sari's major commercial center] and we bumped into the store-owner whom Golnar knew from previous encounters [Golnar is a frequent visitor to the store]. The owner conducts a reading group from her home once a week and today, Golnar asked her if she [the owner] wouldn't mind leading a book-club session with her and a few others. Golnar persisted so much that the owner finally relented.

While the integrated nature of Sari's urban morphology presents poor Saravi youth with objectively greater associational opportunities, this does not take away from the fact that poor young men and women in south Tehran also have opportunities – albeit more limited – to form ties to middle class individuals and networks. Indeed, the lack of affordable housing in the middle and northern districts of Tehran has created what Bayat (2008) has termed a "spatially marginalized middle class" (2008: 584) – students, businessmen, professionals and civil service workers – who have been pushed into south Tehran's urban living quarters. As a result, a number of individuals who live and work in south Tehran do not "belong to the sociological category of urban poor" (Bayat 2008: 584) – a pattern that can also be found in the spatial dynamics of many other cities in the developing world (Bayat and Dennis 2000; Hopkins 1998). Thus, while many residents of south Tehran are poor, there are also working, middle- and upper-middle class residents in the area. The latter often consists of small business owners who prefer to live in south Tehran in order to be close to their families, their businesses or both. Poor young men and women frequently turn to these individuals – a number of whom are even members of their own extended families – to pursue job opportunities.

There are still other middle-class individuals who reside in the northern or middle districts of Tehran, but who work in the south as government officials or NGO workers. Those poor young men and women who are qualified to receive aid from these organizations frequently interact with the organizations' middle-class representatives who visit their homes to provide emotional and financial support and to check up on the youth. A representative example is a social worker who pays frequent visits to young, fifteen-year-old Gelareh – a child from an abusive home in south Tehran – in order to guide and encourage her to study so that Gelareh can reach her aspirations of becoming an engineer.

Poor young south Tehrani's opportunities for developing middle-class ties are further enhanced by their work. Itinerant young vendors often travel to the northern sections of the capital city to sell their wares where they come into contact with high Tehrani society. There are yet others who are stationed in the south as apprentices or vendors and who interact on a daily basis with middle-class clients.

Thus, while many scholars have argued that living in a poor neighborhood drastically decreases one's associational opportunities and one's prospects for upward mobility, the case of Tehran demonstrates that there are pockets of middle-class

individuals even in the most spatially segregated, class divergent communities who can influence poor young people's contact investments. In other words, Tehran illustrates that not all poor areas are simply poverty belts, as has been the dominant assumption about urban poverty in both the developed and developing worlds, but are also the abode of many non-poor urbanites. Alternatively, no geographical factor increasing associational opportunities – such as a highly integrated urban morphology or the presence of middle-class residents in predominately poor communities – is a guarantee that external ties to the middle class will develop (see Small 2004). A relationship between one's location and one's network development is conditional on a multitude of intermediary *cultural* factors[116] – namely the young person's street smarts, family socialization, spousal support, and subjective interpretation of his position with the age structure. These socialization mechanisms[117] not only influence the extent to which the poor young person will build ties to socio-economically more powerful others, but they also affect –along with his age, ability to take risks, and ideology – his accumulation and consumption tactics as well as his use of prayer.

Street Smarts

Poor young men and women who spend time in public come to learn the street smarts or the skills and knowledge they need for dealing with urban life, and particularly, with its difficult aspects. These skills further serve to facilitate poor young people's everyday interactions. The social skills that these youth acquire constitute the basis for the development of strategies of action that help them to not only reap the maximum possible economic benefits, but to also develop associational opportunities. For some poor youth, street smarts enable them to skillfully navigate city streets on their own. For others, having street smarts enables them set up shop in sites that attract the most customers and brings them the maximum possible profits:

> [*Rasul, 21-year-old pastry vendor in south Tehran*]: I go to the courthouse area during the day to sell because the municipality doesn't bother me there and there are all these newly freed prisoners who come out of court *[here, Rasul means that these individuals are his best clients]*.

Still, for others, the possession of street smarts leads them to fit in and hang out at various venues, thereby building their informal networks:

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[116] In this context, I view culture as a set of resources that provide the means for action (Swidler 1986; 2001).

[117] In their review of how neighborhood poverty exerts its effects, Small and Newman (2001) propose a categorization (socialization and instrumental mechanisms) based on the type of effect the mechanism is hypothesized to have: a socializing effect on individuals or a constraining effect on individual agency. Socialization is viewed to exert its effects on individuals via peers (Jencks and Mayer 1990), role models (Cutler and Glaeser 1997; Wilson 1987), institutions (i.e. non-resident adults attached to institutions – see, for instance, Jencks and Mayer 1990), linguistics (isolation from standard American English – see, for instance, Massey and Denton 1993), relative deprivation (Jencks and Mayer 1990) and the development of an oppositional culture (Jencks and Mayer 1990; Massey and Denton 1993). Instrumental mechanisms exert effects on the individual by isolating him from institutional (Brooks-Gunn et al 1997; Wilson 1987) and public resources (Massey and Denton 1993) as well as from social networks of employed people (Tigges et al 1998; Wilson 1987). For a full review of the literature see Small and Newman (2001).

[Nader and Kami often hang out with a well-connected neighbor at his grocery store in Sari most afternoons. Unlike his friends, Sohrab, rarely spends prolonged periods of time hanging out in different venues throughout the city. The following is Nader and Kami's description as to why Sohrab doesn't hang out with them]: [Unlike us], Sohrab is a *bacheh mosbat [a person who always does what he's told]*," Nader laughingly explains. "[He prays so much] that he has the imprint of a prayer bead stuck on his forehead!", Kami adds. *[Here the boys are implicitly criticizing Sohrab for spending his time praying rather than experiencing life.]*

Street smarts in Sari and Tehran are a set of strategic decisions to maximize one's chances of success when undertaking an economic strategy and to minimize potential problems in the process. It is a sense that includes knowing how to present yourself in public, how to handle yourself on your own, and how to speak to others. All poor young people in both cities, however, do not equally share this sense. Poor youth who I observed who spent more time hanging out with friends or working in various public venues had a much more developed sense of how to get along with others in the community than those who spent the majority of their days sequestered in school or at home. Indeed, recurrent interactions – with clients, neighbors, friends or employers – reinforced these youths' knowledge and kept their street skills ready for immediate use (Dohan 2003).

Familial Ethos

While street savvy is learned and reinforced through continual social interactions in the public sphere, the poor young individual's familial attitude towards honor determines the extent to which he can engage with this same public. The code of honor promotes a certain code of morality and propriety in the everyday lives of poor youth in both cities (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, as different families have different manners, moods and characters, they set different parameters of behavior to reflect this widely shared code of honor. Some parents have strict rules that regulate their children's interpersonal relationships. Other families leave their youngsters relatively free to interact with others by allowing them to peruse the city on their own, to hang out with friends and family members in public sites, and to learn how to fend for themselves:

> *[Yas]* My mother trusts me. She knows that I won't be hanging out with boys, but that I'll be hanging out with my female cousins. … Most lower-class parents won't let their daughters go out alone.

Yas' comments reveal how gender norms also play an important role in determining a family's attitudes toward their children's social interactions. Indeed, in order to preserve the *namus* of a young woman, families often carefully monitor an unmarried girl's movements, considering it indecorous for her to be seen in public on her own or with friends without the presence of an accompanying parent or older relative. While parents do prohibit sons from spending excessive amounts of time in public as well, this has more to do with preempting them from getting involved with the "wrong" crowd rather than rearing them to conform to (gender) norms of righteousness. A representative example is the mother of 15-year-old Sohrab who is reluctant to let Sohrab hang out with his peers in their predominately lower-class neighborhood in Sari for fear

that he will be led astray. Sohrab, in turn, is not able to spend time with Nader and Kami at various community venues, thereby losing opportunities to develop contacts with individuals from various social and economic backgrounds in the community.

Age

The third factor influencing poor youths' mobility strategies is their age. Some poor young individuals in their teens quickly discover that their young age prevents them from winning greater socio-economic gains. These youth believe that such age discrimination reflects a more general cultural attitude of *cheshm be ham cheshmi* (competitiveness), whereby others try to do whatever they can to make sure that the young individual does not succeed. Take the following excerpt from my fieldnotes:

> *[Hussein, whom we met in Chapter 2, recounts the following incident]:* Everyone wants *zir abamo bezanan [loosely, to prevent one from getting ahead].* I'm building an apartment on top of my parent's house….the municipality won't help me [with the required building permits], though, because they say I'm too young!

In contrast, other youth in their mid- to late- twenties believe that the older one is, the less opportunity he has to pursue lofty goals. This "framing" (Goffman 1974; Small 2004; Young 2004) of their position within the age structure affects their economic participation. These youth believe life has passed them by and that they therefore must be content with what they have. This view leads them to work hard to retain the gains that they have already made or to secure the success of their children. Twenty-eight-year-old Nader, for instance, worked only to ensure his child's future because "it's past my age to work for my own dreams. I'll be able to handle myself in whatever job I do, but my child's future is uncertain."

Support

For poor, married young women, support – in the form of approval – from their spouses frequently determines their degree of occupational choice. For instance, poor young women who are soon to be married often cite their fiancés' discomfort at having their wives work outside the home as a reason for their decision to quit their jobs once married. One young woman from a low-income family, for instance, decided to leave her job as an NGO worker because her husband wanted her "to be home when he was home." The husband of another young woman in Sari, Sahar, did not want the young woman to work outside the home, but had no qualms if she worked from home. The young woman eventually began to operate her own dressmaking business from home. It should be noted that many times, these young women do not believe that they are being forced to stay at home against their will.[118] As the young NGO worker stated, "I love this job, but honestly I'm tired of it too. He (my husband) told me it's up to me ultimately (to come to work or not), and I decided not to come anymore."

While scholars have cited such instances of patriarchal ideology within the family as an instance of a gender-specific barrier to young women's entry into the labor force (Glass and Nath 2006; Hijab 2001; Joseph and Slyonovics 2001), it should not go unmentioned that there are many married, poor young women like Sahar in both Sari and Tehran who are self-employed businesswomen who work inside the home as

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[118] There was one instance of a poor young woman in Sari, however, whose husband would not allow her to leave the house.

seamstresses, barbers or artisans. Husbands are frequently more willing to accept such arrangements because there is no longer an incompatibility between their wives' work and gender roles, and wives are more content because they can manage the affairs of the household at close range.[119] In contrast, poor, married young women who have the full support of their spouse have the option of participating in a wider range of work opportunities and often work in the *public* arena as apprentices or small business owners. Those who do not work pursue higher education. When describing their educational and career choices and strategies, these women do not hesitate to cite their husband's satisfaction with their pursuits as a facilitating factor. As Nina stated, "I'm studying right now to get into college and my husband wants me to study too."

Risk-Taking

The ability to undertake moderate risks is a key factor influencing the poor young person's mobility strategies.[120] Many of the poor young men and women I knew in Sari and Tehran who were entrepreneurs worked hard to ensure that they would not lose everything if the venture they took up failed to secure their objectives. The steps they took included imitating the business strategies of near others who were able to gain some measure of economic success, turning to close family members for loans and in-kind transfers in order to start a business, and discussing at great lengths the pros and cons of potential business deals with friends and family. Other poor youth took up moderate risks when they made the decision to invest in formal training ventures (either higher education or the trades) that they believed could produce some form of social or economic mobility for them. In general, the calculations all of these youth made involved assessments of the potential loss to their material assets, their time and/or their well-being. A good example is Maziar, a successful entrepreneur in his mid-thirties from Tehran who recounted his socio-economic rise from abject poverty to solid middle-class.

Maziar's father passed away when he was in his teens and at 16, he dropped out of school to work full time in order meet household expenses. He became an apprentice to a fish seller in the local bazaar and eventually gained so much skill at gutting fish that another fish seller decided to hire Maziar as his apprentice to work the night shift. Occasionally, Maziar would supplement the wages he earned from working in these two jobs by taking home leftover fish and fish parts that no one wanted to buy (fish heads and tails) so that his mother could sell them to their neighbors, thereby laying the foundations for his first business venture. Maziar taught his mother and sisters how to clean and skin fish so that they could run this small side business without him while he was working. At the same time, he was able to secure the permission of his second boss (the one where Maziar worked the night shift) to let him gut fish from home. Maziar used this opportunity to enlist the help of his mother and siblings, thereby allowing him to gut more fish in a lesser amount of time and enabling him to earn more from his second job.

With the wages Maziar earned from working in these three jobs, Maziar was not only able to pay for household expenses, but also amass a meager savings account. At one point, Maziar decided to risk losing all of his savings by going to the south of Iran

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[119] This is indicative of the influence of gender roles that can be culturally male dominated. See Bourdieu (2002).

[120] The ability to undertake moderate risks – as opposed to low or high risks – was also a key factor determining the socio-economic success of gang members in the United States (see Sanchez-Jankowski 1999).

and spending his savings to buy fish directly from suppliers in order to sell them in the local bazaar back in Tehran. When he saw that he was able to earn a rather significant amount of profit by eliminating the middleman and purchasing fish directly, Maziar moved on to a more lucrative business venture. He had his mother gut fish in his stead (i.e. become the apprentice), and he focused his energies on turning his small at-home fish selling business into a full-time enterprise – yet another risky venture. He went into business for himself by buying and selling fish in the local bazaar. Fortunately for Maziar, because he was trustworthy and had proved his abilities earlier when he was an apprentice in the bazaar, fish sellers were willing to buy from him, thereby leading to his venture's success. At the age of 26, after ten years of working, Maziar was able to accumulate enough money from his at-home business to buy his previous employer's store. In Maziar, then, we see the socio-economic rise of the poor young entrepreneur who selects ventures that require a certain amount of risk including using up one's savings and starting a risky business venture, but who simultaneously takes steps – such as working in other jobs, enlisting the help of family members and engaging in low-risk, "pilot" ventures – to ensure that he does not end up socio-economically worse than what he started.

Ideology

In both cities, poor youths' sense that God will provide influences the extent to which these youth rely on prayer to attain both material and non-material goals. While poor young men and women believe that God helps those who help themselves (see Chapter 1), they do not all agree on the extent to which cosmologically oriented dimensions interact with personal effort to determine outcomes. Some poor youth believe that God brings blessings continuously as long as one seeks His help in the process of doing so. In this outlook, prayer plays an equal – if not more influential – role in influencing the success of one's strategies. Shirin, a 25-year-old low-income housewife from Sari, wanted to live a "conscious, hard-working" life so that she could raise her small daughter well. Besides managing the affairs of the household, Shirin also actively saved a large share of the household income so that she and her husband could start building their own house. At the same time, in describing what she did to reach her goals, Shirin downplayed her own effort and placed emphasis on prayer, stating that she "prays …and makes *nazr [in Islam, a nazr is a spiritual vow]. …* I am certain that God will bring me to my goals." Similarly, other poor youth think that they have no other choice but to rely on the divine because they cannot "make it" solely based on their own efforts. As one young laborer in south Tehran, whose job was to carry large loads for bazaar customers in a small wheelbarrow, stated "God *has* to help. Am I going to get anywhere [on my own] with this wheelbarrow? *Doodam dar biyad, be jayi nemirsam* (without His help) [loosely, if my smoke comes out – i.e. even if I die doing this, I won't get anywhere without His help].

In contrast, there are poor young people who believe that one cannot rely on divine assistance all the time when attempting to advance. In this view, God can only help a person out so many times during his endeavors before his luck runs out. As one young man in Sari stated, "*Khastan tavanestane [loosely, when there is a will, there is a way]…* God can't always help, *chance biyari [you have to be lucky for him to help]…*God can help once or twice, not all the time." Interestingly, there are some poor young men and women who once believed that their own efforts would ultimately

determine the outcome of their actions, but who have since "converted" to the dominant view that God's will ultimately prevails. To this end, one must be content with the provisions that God has bestowed and not do anything to change what God has bestowed. Take the following conversation:

> Family member: Congratulations, you're pregnant!
> Rana: Thank you, inshallah it will be your wedding and pregnancy.
> Researcher: What happened Rana, why did you get pregnant so soon? You said that you weren't going to get pregnant until a few years after you got married.
> Rana: It was God's wish.
> Researcher: Did you not want to get pregnant? God wanted it?
> Rana: No, but you're right. We really didn't want to have a child in the beginning, we kept using stuff to prevent it and financially, we couldn't afford it. And I'm really young. But God wanted me to get pregnant, and we're not against it.
> Researcher: Did you take pills or something else?
> Rana: I took pills, but I forgot one day and our baby came that day.
> Rana's mother: I wasn't happy that they kept trying to prevent it. They had to bring one child at least. I always told Rana that whatever God wants will happen. But she always told me that if we prevent it, how will God make me pregnant?
> Rana: Yeah, we were young when we thought we could control ourselves. God really wanted us to get pregnant, maman's right.
> Researcher: Rana jan, when did you find out? … Couldn't you have an abortion?
> Rana: What do you mean? We had a few weeks time to get an abortion, but once my husband and I found out that God gave it, we have to keep it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Placing effort – by accumulating and investing – to achieve their aspirations is consistent with these young people's adoption of the Muslim work ethic and the moral code of honor. For the former, effort is instrumental to socio-economic achievement; for the latter, undertaking strategies to escape poverty is critical for the young person to be able to support his family in order to maintain his *aberou* and subsequently enhance his social standing. Yet, as I have shown throughout this chapter, the presence of facilitating and constraining factors, not the least of which include the individual's place of residence, his familial ethos and his ability to take on moderate risks influence the extent to which he will be able to bring his efforts to fruition. Further still, the experiences of Mehran, Ali, Saba and Yas illustrate how finding work, accumulating capital to start a business, or participating in mutual exchange networks are contingent on the resources that the individual can bring into effect. Indeed, the individual's own initiative must be placed within the context of the social and economic resources that he can bring into his quest for upward mobility. For instance, while working in the family business or participating in gift-giving and exchange networks adds to the coffers of the poor youth, it only does so if the poor youth can draw from the help of a family member who has started his own business and is willing to hire him or if the young person has been able to oblige his end of the reciprocal exchange. Similarly, while investing capital to start one's own business enables the poor youth to maintain his aberou and raise his reputation within the community as an individual on the "up and up", the young person is only able to invest if he can secure a job by virtue of his or his family's *asiliyat*, moral uprightness or networks that allows him to accumulate a decent amount of savings in the first place.

All of these resources function as additional facilitating and constraining factors that are responsible for producing the various types of crude and sophisticated socio-economic initiatives we find among equally poor young individuals. In the struggle to make ends meet and to advance, the resources that poor youth himself brings to the effort are thus as important as the manner in which they dispatch those resources (Dohan 2003). Outside observers who fail to understand the interaction between the initiatives that the poor young person takes to escape poverty and the resources that he has at his disposable for doing so have generally underestimated the complex nature of mobility among the urban poor.

Table 1. *Informal Cash Generating Activities of Poor Youth in Sari and Tehran*

Male	Female
Store/Stall Front Apprentice	Salon Apprentice
Waste Picker*	Store Apprentice
	Worker in garment shop
Hotel Worker	Maids
	Family Business
Family Business	Self-employed (home-based)
	Artisan
Unskilled laborer	Cook
	Seamstress
Semiskilled laborer (carpentry, welding,	Beautician
construction, automotive, farmhand)	Home Produce
Skilled laborer (carpentry, welding,	

* Many Afghan refugees also engaged in this type of work.

construction, farmhand, automotive)
 	
 Gardener
 	
 Self-employed
 	
     Street Vendor (mobile, small household goods, clothing, accessories)
 	
     Petty Trader (gum, fortunes, candy, snacks, illicit cds and dvds)	

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: POVERTY AND THE QUEST FOR MOBILITY IN IRAN

Youth who work in the informal sector and whose wages go unreported often show up in statistical accounts and policy reports as part of the large unemployed youth bulge in the Middle East who have failed to make the transition to adulthood. If accounted for at all, they will be considered to be one of the many unproductive elements who work in the informal economy and who, as a result of a poor work record, are unlikely to push their children into a good education and career (see, for instance, IRIN 2007). The image conveyed by these reports is that low-income youth are an unequivocally marginalized, disaffected group who spend their days waiting in vain for a quality job,[121] for a way to afford forming their own household, or for a different set of public policies and institutions that can "support a new life course" (Dhillion and Yousef 2009).

The complex socio-economic environment currently plaguing the urban Middle East has spawned many questions concerning how the region's most populous demographic – the young[122] – are responding to their conditions. A recent headline in National Geographic,[123] "Young, Angry and Wired", has suggested that the anger of young men and women who have access to some form of technology (such as mobile phones or computers) enables them to share their frustrations with others. The article argued that the experience of unemployment and the lack of the formal labor market to absorb rising numbers of young new entrants[124] could lead to a scenario of double dividend characterized by higher growth and income or to one of double jeopardy, characterized by lower economic growth and social strife. While many policy analysts and researchers have assumed that the latter has taken root in the region, the present study has shown that not all young people in the region that have "stifled" their ambitions, are "angry" or "excluded" from their communities.

With the highest youth cohort in the Middle East (35 percent) and an unemployment rate of 70 percent among those under the age of 30, the numbers certainly paint the Islamic Republic as a country where its youth are unequivocally dissatisfied with accompanying feelings of hopeless. However, very little attention has been paid to the way in which increasing economic deprivation has been translated into everyday life for poor young people in the country. The little research that has been done[125] has often

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[121] Scholars have referred to "waithood" as the "bewildering period of time that a large portion of Middle Eastern youth spend waiting for a full state of adulthood" (Salehi-Isfahani and Dhillon 2008:6).

[122] It is important to note here how reports and analyses frequently fail to differentiate the "young" among the axis of class.

[123] Bartholet, Jeffrey. 2012. "Young, Angry and Wired." *National Geographic.* http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/07/middle-east-youth/bartholet-text

[124] Most youth in this study had access to mobile phones and to a lesser extent, computers.

[125] To date, Kazemi (1980) and Bayat (1997) have provided the only perspectives of poor people's actions in Iran. However, even they have not focused exclusively on youth, but on the poor in general.

focused on their political reactions; namely, their "quiet" encroachment into public spaces at the expense of various power and economic elites to "redistribute social goods and opportunities" and to "attain cultural and political autonomy" (Bayat 2000:548). However, these types of analyses suggest the need for greater theoretical and empirical leverage for understanding the mechanisms involved in leading these youth to adopt the decisions and actions that they do.[126] The current quiet encroachment paradigm, for example, is ill equipped at explaining heterogeneity in observable behavior among the "urban poor." Certainly, as the evidence and analysis borne out by this study show, there are many youth who attempt to improve their lot in life through actions that come at the cost of others, such as when they engage in street vending without proper permits, much to the dismay of merchants. However, there are also many poor youth who are simply working and attempting to earn an honest living for themselves and their families. What should we think about them? How can current theoretical perspectives enable us to come to a full understanding of the situational variety and complexity of poverty among the urban poor?

Observers and the general public alike have assumed that the mechanisms by which material conditions of poverty exerts its effects on individuals must be common to most groups of the urban poor in other parts of the developing world, such as increasing market reform and urbanization reducing formal labor market opportunities for the poor, thereby isolating them. The poor are portrayed as being forced to live in slums, ghettos, favelas and barrios, where they are increasingly isolated from good role models and successful peers. Frustration and hopelessness coupled with their inability to fulfill their material aspirations, in turn, are thought to become "push" factors leading the poor to "serve other 'cultures', such as religious fundamentalism" (Ray 2006:7). Since the onset of the Islamic Revolution, scholarship on Iran has similarly assumed that young people in the country – and particularly poor young people – are an unequivocally marginalized and frustrated social group (see, for instance, Salehi-Isfahani 2010) whose everyday lives look more or less the same as these other "socially excluded" poor urban groups. In this regard, the mechanisms linking poverty to behavior are decontextualized and are believed to operate independently of the particular geographic, demographic, cultural and material contexts in which they occur.

The evidence and analysis shown in this study suggest that if we continue to look at urban poverty in the developing world more generally, and the Middle East in particular, through a similar lens we are likely to completely miss many of the critical pathways by which urban poverty exerts an impact on individuals. Indeed, if we are to assume that the standard view of urban poverty is correct, then we should expect to find the urban poor in the Middle East constantly at-arms against the structural-economic forces that have dislocated them.[127] Instead, what we find in Iran are poor urban groups who are not socially isolated, but who have found ways to be content with their deprived

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[126] Bayat, however, does mention that the pursuit of dignity and the quest to improve their lot in life drive poor people in Iran to engage in quiet, atomized encroachments against the power elite. However, he does not explicate exactly how desires for dignity shape their strategies of action – indeed, his concern lies more with detailing their struggles.

[127] The recent wave of protest movements that have swept the Middle East – collectively referred to as the "Arab Spring" – may be perceived as one such response. However, these movements have frequently involved the educated middle classes, and not the poor.

states and to be integrated into their communities. At issue here is explaining why we find these relatively positive responses to such negative conditions (Small 2004).

In this dissertation I have presented evidence that these responses are quite patterned and deliberate, emanating from several mediating factors that are exogenous to poor young men and women such as their residential location, their parents' positions concerning values and outlooks, their gender, their age, their support systems and their social networks. Others are endogenous factors such as their own desires to avoid the hardships that have surrounded them since a young age, their beliefs in divine determinism, their risk-taking abilities, their street smarts, and their subjective perceptions of their objective socio-economic standing. Patterned differences in behavior among poor youth are the result of these factors interacting with each other. For example, poor youth who have relatively extensive ties with others in their communities have a much more developed street-wise attitude than those who spend their days sequestered in the home or at school.

However, on their own, these factors do little to explain poor young men and women's *motives* for action. Why do these youth undertake particular initiatives to improve their lot in life in the first place? To fully understand why poor youth prefer to undertake certain actions over others, we must place these exogenous and endogenous factors within a larger moral universe that is guided by poor young people's conceptions of good and bad. It is here where the moral codes of honor and work are located. These two moral systems provide both guidelines and an evaluative code for individual initiative and behavioral conduct. Factors such as the young person's street smarts, their subjectivities or perceptions of their socio-economic positioning, and their parents' attitudes subsequently become *resources* that operate to facilitate or constrain the various types of socio-economic initiatives undertaken by urban poor youth in Iran.

A close look at current theories of the urban poor in the Middle East[128] reveals that they are really theories of political struggle and agency and not theories of poverty. This has influenced what these theories have focused on, namely the challenges that marginalized groups pose to states, and it has produced limited explanations concerning the motivations behind the behaviors of the poor. Although these theories can account for conditions of economic deprivation as an instrument facilitating or hindering individual and collective action, they are less adequate for providing an understanding of precisely *how* poverty influences individual and/or collection action.

Alternatively, the theoretical perspective advanced in this dissertation is composed of three, interrelated elements that help to explain the what, when, where and how of action: (1) the moral compass guiding poor youth, (2) their conceptions of the desirable that arise from this moral compass, and (3) the strategies they deploy to get their desires. In so doing, this theory provides explanations of how cognitive constructs shape action by motivating poor youth to select particular strategies among alternative courses of action (Vaisey 2010).

Nearly all other sociological theories concerning the strategies of the urban poor in the Middle East materialize out of assumptions associated with either theories of political extremism (Kashan 2003; Kouaouci 2004; Munoz 2000; Richards 2003) or everyday resistance (Bayat 1997; Hoodfar 1997; Singerman 1995). According to these

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[128] For instance, theories of everyday resistance and quiet encroachment focus on the poor's reactive acts of collective political agency.

theories, the poor either (1) have a mental set characterized by social uprootedness, fatalism and alienation, which lead to cravings for social belonging and security as well as a subsequent involvement in activities that provide them with a form of order and solidarity in their lives[129]; or (2) are engaged in everyday acts of resistance[130] to "refashion state institutions into their sensibilities" (Bayat 2007: 61, 204). However, in the theory put forth in this study, poor youth's strategies of actions emerge neither from the desire to find stability nor from the desire to undermine dominant local and state authority. Rather, they emerge as a result of a particular type of social arrangement found in Iranian society that is centered on the dual pursuits of honor and work. The strategies poor youth employ materialize as a cultural response that seeks to improve their social standing and economic positioning within this social world.

The focus of the remaining discussion of this conclusion will be on the substantive lessons that the perspective presented in this dissertation has on creating a better understanding concerning the factors that have the most influence on the everyday lives of the urban poor in Iran. It will focus on the questions of fatalism, culture and mobility among the poor in Iran, but there are important lessons that are also relevant for the study of social groups elsewhere in both the developed and developing worlds.

FATALISM

The question of fatalism among poor youth in the Middle East is, at itscore, an issue of the effects of perceived immobility on poor youth. How do poor young people cope with structural constraints such as formal labor market rigidity, lack of education or limited opportunities for civic involvement to their mobility out of poverty? Answers to this question by various social scientists working on poverty in the Middle East and elsewhere in the developed and developing worlds have centered on the argument that these individuals adapt to poverty by leveling their aspirations to reflect their disadvantaged circumstances (Anderson 1998; MacLeod 1987; Rahnema 2009; Silver 2007; Willis 1977).[131] In this outlook, structural constraints are internalized by poor young men and women and give rise to a submissive or fatalistic outlook toward their

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[129] As Lipset (1963) argues, the mental set of the poor is characterized by aggressiveness, admiration of force inherited from parents, lack of education, absence of information, social uprootedness and alienation. These behaviors, in turn, are thought to lead to cravings for social belonging and security, which make radical movements an increasingly attractive offer for the poor.

[130] Examples of notions of everyday resistance are thought to be the purview of both Middle Eastern poor and middle-class alike and include vending without proper permits in Iran (Bayat 1997), engaging in work in the black market in Egypt (Singerman 1995), and veiling practices in Egypt (MacLeod 1991). These activities constitute the subversive yet ordinary practices of daily life that enable young men and women in the Middle East to establish a politics of presence that may modify state institutions into their own sensibilities (Bayat 2007).

[131] See Clark and Qizilbash (2007) and World Bank (2009). Using survey data on impoverished communities in South Africa, Clark and Qizilbash argue that those who live in the most straitened circumstances are not necessarily those who have the lowest aspirations. Likewise, using qualitative and quantitative research data on 15 countries in Latin America, South America, Asia and Africa, the World Bank's *Moving Out of Poverty* study contends that poor youth often have relatively high career aspirations, aspirations that far exceed the occupations of their parents.

deprived economic states, characterized by dejection, hopelessness and in more recent articulations, to their "lack of a capacity to aspire" (Appadurai 2004).[132]

If these researchers are correct, then we should expect that poor youth not undertake initiatives to advance. They should adopt a submissive attitude toward their station in life that would inhibit them from taking steps to improve their socio-economic conditions. Poor young people's incremental mobility, however, has suggested that such hopelessness or fatalism is not present in any significant way in the lives of these youth. Poor youth are not without hope; they go about their everyday activities and win small gains – whether in the community, at work, at school, or in the home – with the hope that their lives will get better. Their hopes for the good life manifest itself in two ways: (1) in their more general desires to preserve their *aberou* (honor) and gain elements of prestige through hard work; and (2) their more specific desires for particular goods and outcomes such as well-paying jobs, connections, a good husband, clothes and jewelry that are tied up with these general norms. While their economic deprivation and feelings of disenchantment with formal institutional structures frequently drive poor young men and women to reject mainstream routes to attaining their ideas of the good life, such as when they prefer to work in the informal economy over working in the formal sector or when they opt to undertake apprenticeships over going to college, these preferences hold an autonomous capacity to provide meaning to their lives. This more visible set of preferences has often led scholars of urban poverty to lose sight of the higher normative contexts (Appadurai 2004) such as the moral codes of honor and work among the youth of this study in which "leveled aspirations" are nurtured and developed. Decontextualizing these wants from the larger normative universe in which they are located leads to the dominant perspective that conditions of increasing poverty lead to growing feelings of hopelessness and fatalism.

The case of youth poverty in Iran sheds further light on another, interrelated conception of fatalism within the more general literature on economic development in the Middle East associated with Islam. The crux of this Islamic fatalism perspective is its search for the mechanisms that have led to the Middle East's relative (in comparison with the West) economic underdevelopment. In this view, Muslim societies and peoples have lagged behind their counterparts in the West because of their embrace of an "extreme form of predestination that sways [their] theology toward fatalism" (Acevedo 2008: 1717).[133] This "inshallah-fatalism" (God Willing-type fatalism) complex has

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[132] Appadurai (2004) relates this capacity to the fact that the poor hold an ambivalent relationship to the dominant norms of the societies in which they live. Their cynicism, distance or hostility towards these norms causes them to have ideas about the "good life" that promote their own degradation. Further still, because the poor do not have the more wealthy's extent of experiences, opportunities, resources, and power necessary to link "material goods and opportunities to more general possibilities and options…and back again" (Appadurai 2004: 68-69), they end up having a more weak horizon of aspirations.

[133] Alternatively, Kuran (2003) argues that it has been the legal infrastructure of the region – namely, the Islamic law of inheritance, which inhibited capital accumulation; the conceptual absence in Islamic law of the notion of "corporation" which weakened civil society and the waqf, which locked resources into unproductive organization. The remnants of these legal obstacles to economic development, in Kuran's view, continue to remain a factor in the region's relative underdevelopment (see Kuran 2003).

subsequently been associated with irrationality, fatalism, and a strong sense of the collective – in short, all the characteristics that have been rejected by the modern West in favor for an emphasis on personal initiative and individualism (Acevedo 2008).

In common with the Islamic fatalism perspective, the theoretical perspective adopted in this study does indeed find that beliefs in divine determinism are salient to the everyday lived experiences of the poor. However, it neither assumes that this belief common to most poor young men and women is the most important determinant of action or inaction, nor that beliefs in divine will are inherently fatalistic. In fact, because it starts from the assumption that poor youth are *already engaged in meaningful actions to pursue their ideas of the good life* (see Chapter 1), it treats their beliefs in divine determinism as one mechanism among many that can either constrain or hinder their activities. In so doing, what this perspective finds is that beliefs in the "will of the divine" operate not to breed inactivity and stall progress, but to indicate poor young men and women's sense of the precariousness of their undertakings and to provide solace in times of hardship. More significantly, it finds that notions of divine determinism function as a means by which poor youth believe they will reap greater rewards from God. Indeed, poor young people's emphasis on predestination are grounded in the idea that they have to be content with what God gives, and God will give whatever He wants, so that they can gain God's favor and ultimately receive divine compensation. Reflected in their adoption of the adage, *az to harkat az Khoda barkat* [loosely, God helps those who help themselves], poor youths' understanding of fate is a "matter of ongoing and continuing interaction between human will and God's will" (Esposito 2003: 254). In this context, what is erroneously referred to as Islamic fatalism is, in fact, a greater acceptance of a higher moral order that breeds a quite "rationalized interaction between human action and cosmological determinism" (Acevedo 2008: 1740). In this way, religious articulations do not lead to inertia in attempts to move forward, but to increased effort. Further still, a pronounced expectation of the hand of God in their affairs does not negate the fact that poor youth in Iran also adopt highly individualistic tendencies that have been assumed to be the authority of the West. Indeed, autonomy is a highly valued trait within this particular Muslim sub-group and manifests itself in various circumstances – such as when poor young men and women engage in deliberate struggles to promote their own interests within the household or when they attempt to break free of bonds of dependency to others, including kin members.

CULTURE

Throughout this dissertation, I have suggested that integrating a values approach to culture and poverty with a toolkits approach to culture provides a more complete understanding of the mechanisms that operate to keep the urban poor the Middle East "socially alive" (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008). Indeed, this study has found culture as defined by the interaction between poor young people's values, wants and strategies thriving among poor young men and women in Sari and Tehran. Similar to recent studies that have found a culture among the poor which provides them with a means to attain fulfillment in life (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008), this study finds that poor young people share a cultural worldview that not only provides a sense of meaning to their lives, but also functions to create a social arrangement that keeps life manageable for them. However, the cultural framework adopted in this dissertation to understand how poor

young people attempt to produce a life for themselves differs from previous analyses of culture among the urban poor in several important regards.

First, unlike culture-of-poverty theories, which have attempted to explain *why* the poor remain poor (Lewis 1956; Moynihan 1965), this study has attempted to explain *how* a particular group of poor individuals *manage* within structural conditions of increasing material scarcity (Dohan 2003). This is an important distinction because the present analysis in no way argues that the *cause* of poor youth's material deprivation is their value systems, their aspirations or their strategies of action. Rather, it simply maintains that young Iranian men and women who find themselves increasingly excluded from formal, globalized institutions and structures utilize a certain set of values, wants and strategies that enables them to not simply "survive" and "tolerate" their existing conditions, but to find contentment and even joy within it. As such, this study demonstrates that depressed economic conditions do not make it impossible to live a fulfilling life, just as superior economic conditions do not guarantee a fulfilling life.

Second, unlike previous studies,[134] this dissertation does not attach any normative value to these youths' cultural system--it is neither wholly good nor wholly bad. While the moral codes of honor and work and the values, aspirations, and strategies that arise from these two codes facilitate socio-economic mobility in certain circumstances, they can also function as a "poverty trap" (Bowles, Durlauff and Hoff 2006) in other instances. For instance, while participation in networks of gift-giving and exchange can add to the coffers of the poor young person, they can also entangle the youth in further debt, thus reducing their ability to gain autonomy. Similarly, apprenticeships in the informal economy – while vital in providing skills, training, and a source of cash income to poor youth can also inhibit them from pursuing more lucrative career paths. Thus, while the social structure that youth must engage in can be managed to produce a meaningful life, it can also prove strong enough to reproduce poverty among them.

Third, unlike previous studies that have found the subcultures of the poor to emerge from their opposition to the values of the mainstream (Anderson 1999; Banfield 1958), this study has found that the moral codes of honor and work do not emerge from poor young people's opposition to the middle class. Rather, desires including those to preserve one's honor, safeguard one's reputation and gain prestige are shared by both poor and non-poor alike. However, what is significant for understanding the stratification system in Iran as well as behavioral differences between poor young men and women and their middle-class counterparts is that poor youth approach their aspirations largely in an attempt to preserve their social honor whereas the non-poor approach their goals mainly in an effort to increase their prestige. Precisely because the poor have little in terms of economic capital to conceal shortcomings before the public judgment, they're much more vulnerable to affronts to their honor. The driving force behind their aspirations thus becomes to preserve their reputation and *aberou* before the public gaze. On the other

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[134] Anderson (1999), for instance, finds that two moral pillars guide the conduct of poor, inner-city residents in the United States: the code of civility or decency which is associated with the dominant middle class and the code of the street, which materializes out of the poor's opposition to mainstream norms. Anderson's depiction of the "street" is wholly negative and characterized by deficiency and deficit while his characterization of "decent" families is wholly good – indeed, the latter strive to keep their distance from their ill-mannered, street neighbors (see Wacquant 2002).

hand, middle-class youth by virtue of possessing resources including money, knowledge, skills and connections, can *afford* to be less concerned with affronts to their honor, and focus primarily on seeking material and non-material goods in an effort to increase their social standing.

Further still, it is not only the drive to preserve their good name, the reputation of their families or their own character that leads poor young men and women to undertake specific actions at the cost of others. More importantly, it is because poor youth believe that these motivations define the "proper", "righteous" or "*aberou-mand*" (honorable) way to live one's life that these moral systems become resilient and ingrained codes of conduct that are able to rise above particular social and geographic barriers to influence behavior.

The fourth and final difference between the cultural approach adopted in this study and those in previous studies of the urban poor is that it demonstrates that no one dimension of culture – whether values, aspirations or strategies of action – is either adequate on its own or in interaction with the other dimensions of culture to explain outcomes among the poor. As the case of youth poverty in Iran demonstrates, strategies materialize out of the interaction of values and wants. For instance, the belief that one should preserve his *aberou* provides the blueprint for the poor youth's desires to maximize his wealth, which in turn, motivates him to turn down lower paying jobs in the formal sector in favor of work in the informal economy. However, individual initiative in the form of the interaction of these values, aspirations and strategies of action is not enough to ensure the young person's short-distance, socio-economic mobility. More socio-structural factors including the inability of formal institutions to provide for poor young people's needs, poor youths' interactions with close others and their geographic location provide the enabling or disabling conditions that shape patterned differences in behavior.

A focus on how cultural – i.e. values, aspirations and strategies – and structural factors intertwine to shape poor young people's activities leads us to examine how these individuals attempt to integrate themselves into the socio-economic fabric of their communities, rather than to assess how they are socially excluded, culturally deviant or structurally disenfranchised. There are many poor young people in Iran caught between the rock of normative expectations and the hard place of structural economic deprivation (Dohan 2003). These youth attempt to solve this problem by devising a cultural system that enables them to manage the tension between the two. It is here where we must pay attention to the particular structural resources that poor youth bring into their struggles to advance that can do a better job than others at facilitating these youths' incremental mobility (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008).

I suggest that understanding the mechanisms influencing the reasons why this is the case should be the central focus of our analyses, rather than simply an afterthought. Indeed, if we are to deal more concretely with the complexity of the lived experiences of poverty among young people in the region, we must first come to a better understanding of the intermediary pathways that connect the larger social and economic urban environments in which these youth live to their behaviors. It is only by doing so that we can sharpen our theories of urban poverty to reflect how conditions of economic deprivation persist, how they provide a sense of purpose to actors who are caught in them, and how they can ultimately be overcome.

MOBILITY

The discussion presented thus far has highlighted the importance of both objective (economic) and subjective (perceptions) experiences in determining whether or not the poor individual can increase his socio-economic standing. Small objective gains such as a job in the informal economy, higher wages, cash loans or in-kind gifts enable the young person to further his socio-economic interests by purchasing material goods or by investing. These objective gauges of his socio-economic standing, in turn, operate to enable him to be perceived as an honorable (*aberou-mand*) and hard-working individual, which subsequently legitimates greater social standing within his community. Thus, economic experiences confer marginal, but subjectively meaningful measures of status to the poor young person. Indeed, objective rewards mean little if poor young men and women are not publicly recognized as honorable or abiding by the Muslim work ethic. In this sense, the objective rewards that they gain are less relevant to their interests and to their upward mobility than favorable public evaluations on these two fronts. It is in this context that we must place our discussion of poverty and mobility and the contribution of Iran's case to our understanding of their linkage.

The study of poverty, as a subset of stratification, has focused disproportionately on *inter*-class upward mobility as the solution for improving the poor's life chances. Within this framework, scholars have placed a concerted effort on identifying how valuable resources, such as income, education, and social networks are allocated across various occupational categories (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Featherman and Hauser, 1976; Goldthorpe and Hope, 1972; Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992). Once scholars have settled on some distribution system (see Figure 1), upward mobility among the poor then becomes a matter of transitioning the poor from one occupation to another. Since similar occupational strata are also assumed to be similar in terms of their control of various levels and types of assets (e.g. economic and social), then it follows that the poor can only acquire greater resources if they are able to move from one occupational category to another. From the vantage point of inter-class mobility, then, institutional arrangements and individual practices that are not conducive to breaking through social classes defined in this way are explanations for the perpetuation of poverty cycles.

From here, it is rather easy to see how discussions of poverty in the Middle East, and especially that among the regions' young, have been dominated by discussions of how formal sector unemployment is a major contributing factor toward rising rates of poverty and social exclusion among this segment of society. The belief here, of course, is that patterns of labor force movement become a proxy for the young person's well-being. This assumption, though, is vulnerable to missing how poor youth accumulate opportunities and resources (e.g. contacts, material goods, prestige) that contribute to upward, *short-distance* mobility, that are both valuable for them, that are strategically manageable, and that enable them to improve their life chances *within* structural conditions of economic deprivation. Indeed, as this study has shown, poor Iranian youth are undertaking more modest shifts in mobility that they perceive and experience as deeply significant. These incremental gains also exert some independent effect on the structure of opportunities available to the mobile subject later on in their lives. Indeed, if we bring into view other mobility pathways, such as gaining prestige and social standing through the maximization of internal social ties through financial accomplishment,

academic achievement, marginal income gains, or the preservation of one's *aberou*, then we can begin to capture the potential richness of the experience of mobility among poor youth and address the efforts that they make to socially advance and integrate themselves within the larger community, and thus carve out a meaningful existence. For instance, socio-economic activities such as spending one's money on clothes and jewelry or refusing to accept formal sector employment may possess some autonomous capacity for generating growth in the lives and well-being of the poor by raising their status within the poor community. By shifting our focus to how the poor accrue these *incremental* economic and non-economic gains, we can begin to reconceptualize our notion of mobility to incorporate the idea of *intra-group* mobility using the dimensions of status, social participation and wealth. In so doing, we can utilize as a metric for mobility the extent to which the pursuits of the poor provide accumulative advances in social standing and recognition rather than the extent to which their pursuits lead to structural occupational mobility. Thus, what observers construe as the seeming persistence of poverty, may in fact be rationalized by the actors involved to constitute a slow and grinding upward march so long as they achieve outcomes that are valuable to them.

The major shortcoming of prevailing perspectives on mobility, namely, their reductionism of meaningful upward movement among the poor in terms of class transitions within the occupational hierarchy inhibits a more discriminating analysis that brings into view the multiple moves of a person in his lifetime. Mobility among the poor requires that it be viewed in terms of *incremental* mobility. I believe that this perspective is able to overcome the limitations of prior approaches by providing a better understanding of the life outcomes of the poor in Iran and the Developing Countries more generally. The concept of incremental mobility describes the atomized advancements of the poor to improve their lives. It is marked by small, but significant strategies, decisions, and gains for the actors involved. In the conceptual framework utilizing incremental mobility, subjective perceptions of what constitutes getting ahead shape the various mobility pathways that a poor individual may undertake.

In arguing for incremental mobility, I build off the work of Wilensky (1966) and what he terms as the "consolation prize theory of social mobility." For Wilensky, "the ladders up which a man can climb in modern society are so numerous that falling behind on one or falling off another may neither cause an irrevocable loss of social position nor yield much sense of deprivation." Indeed, according to Wilensky, some other basis of social differentiation will provide an alternative stratifcation system such as that based on appearances or behavior (Wilensky, 1966: 110-111). As such, the consolation prize theory of mobility underscores the need to look beyond big class occupational transitions when assessing whether social mobility has occurred among the poor. To be sure, the consolation prize theory of mobility suggests that occupational transitions, whether between classes or within the lower class, are only one among a dozen types of socio-economic movement that is meaningful for the mobile subject and his community. Thus, these alternative incremental movements establish various status hierarchies according to which the mobile individual identifies himself in relation to his peers.[135]

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[135] In this way, individual and community perceptions of what constitute high status when "acted and lived without being stated…become norms and values explicitly recognized" (Bourdieu, 1977: 232). That is, beliefs of what constitute high status become objective indicators of mobility

In Sari and Tehran, poor youth create a sub-stratification system within poverty that serves as a type of evaluative code for assessing each other. Within this sub-stratification system, poor youth are assessed according to the extent to which they conform to the values associated with the honor code and within the Muslim work ethic. These values provide a very public set of subjective evaluative criteria, which dictate the personal attributes and conduct necessary for the individual to protect his honor and to further his status and respectability within the community. In accord with the honor code, the young person who is never seen asking for financial assistance, who exhibits moral and sexual purity and who takes pains to present himself and his home in the best possible light will have earned the admiration of his community members. Similarly, in accordance with the Muslim work ethic, the more effort the poor youth places to achieve financial security and/or to advance within the education system, the more he will be able to safeguard his reputation before the public judgment and to increase his status among his peers. Indeed, the rewards that are bestowed upon the poor youth who is both honorable (*aberou-mand*) and hard-working are numerous. People will be more willing to hire him because he is seen to be an individual with character (*ba shakhsiyat*), of noble origins (*aseel*), pure (*pak*), and responsible (*masuliyat pazeer*). He will be judged as a good marriage candidate and his family and community will go to great lengths to ensure that he marries a similarly well-respected individual (even among the lower class). He will be able to expand his informal networks since more people will want to associate with him. In short, exhibiting the virtues associated with the two moral codes will enable the young person to move higher up within the stratification hierarchy of his local society. Endogenous and exogenous factors, including the young person's street smarts, risk-taking abilities, age and participation in networks of gift-giving and exchange operate as facilitating or constraining mechanisms that help or hinder the poor young person's incremental movements within their community's stratification system.

Having said this, the incremental mobility approach does not preclude that formal sector employment or larger scale occupational transitions and incomes can alleviate conditions of economic deprivation and contribute to the poor young person's full integration into broader society – one characterized not simply by his local community. However, the issue here is the role that the poor youth's current lived experiences play in expanding the individual's opportunity to pursue his desires of the good life and to integrate himself however slowly and incompletely into the socio-economic fabric of his community. As such, we must pay attention not simply to the resources and incomes that the poor person holds, but also to the various contingencies that affect the way these material goods are converted into the person's ability to get what he wants. These contingencies further have the potential to exert some independent effect on the structure of opportunities available to the mobile subject later on in life. It is only by doing so that we can sharpen our theories of urban poverty to reflect how conditions of economic deprivation persist, how they provide a sense of purpose to actors who are caught in them, and how they can ultimately be overcome.

Figure 1. Summary Description of Inter-Class Mobility

and serve as powerful conditioning agents that exert some independent influence on the individual's behaviors.
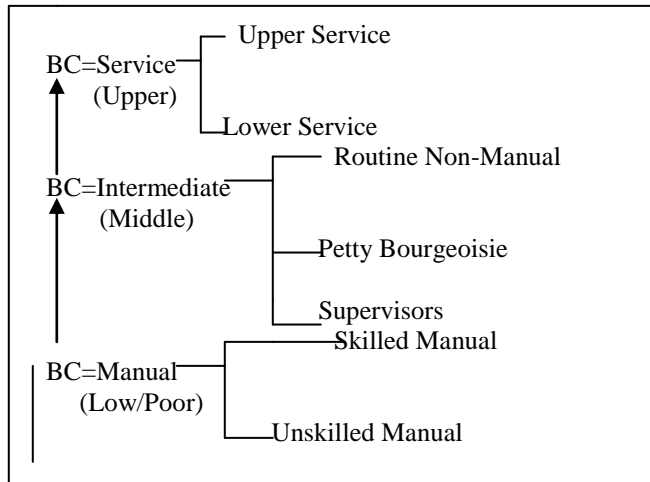
Note: BC=Big Class; arrow indicates upward mobility.
Partially adapted from Weeden, Kim, De Carlo and
Grusky (2008) and Erickson and Goldthorpe (1992).

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