

Pascale, C-M, (2021) *Living on the Edge: When Hard Times Become a Way of Life.* Polity Press.

Review by Allison L. Hurst

This often poignant and moving book presents a vision of America and Americans that is often missing from dominant narratives produced by people living in relative comfort some distance away from the reality for millions of economically struggling Americans. It is based on an original research design that is a cross between Studs Terkel's opportunistic approach and more rigorous sociological research methods. From 2017 to 2018, Pascale 'travelled the country to talk with people who live in communities where hard times have become a way of life' (p. 233). Her decision to visit three regions of the country – Appalachia, the Standing Rock and Wind River Reservations in the Midwest, and Oakland, California –allowed for a much more diverse sample (racially, ethnically, geographically, politically) than other recent works on 'white working class' people in a single location.

In each locale Pascale initiated conversations with random strangers, whom she met at gas stations, flea markets, pawn shops, and other places where strangers are likely to converge. Some of these conversations went so well that she was able to formally invite the stranger to sit down with her for a formal interview. These twenty-seven interviews form the heart of the book. Information on these interviewees, including the names they adopted for themselves for this book and their espoused racial identities (e.g., Arapaho, White/Italian, Mexican/Latino, Native American/American Indian, Caucasian, Black/White), are found in a helpful appendix.

Pascale adopts an Institutional Ethnography (IE) approach, adapted from Dorothy E. Smith, the trailblazing feminist scholar who also developed standpoint theory. Although their stories clearly anchor the book, it is not simply about particular people, but rather 'the larger contexts around them' – how 'business practices and government policies create, normalize, and entrench economic struggles for many in order to produce extreme wealth for a few' (xi). Local experiences provide 'a window into how broader power relations work' (p. 236). Pascale takes individual stories about unemployment, bad jobs, payday loans, slum landlords, and traces these back to structures of power and policy. For example, she explains payday lending and food deserts as background to stories about being in debt and hungry. Embedded throughout the text are 'budgets' which highlight the disjuncture between what people are paid and what is required for a decent living in a particular place. These budgets are an eye-opener for those accustomed to being able to pay their bills. Ultimately, Pascale explains, this is a book 'about power that has been leveraged by government and corporations at the expense of ordinary people' (xi).

Each chapter can operate as a stand-alone chapter, although the whole still adds up to more than the sum of its parts. In Chapter Two, we meet six members of 'the struggling class,' the term that those Pascale interviews almost universally endorse rather than 'working class.' But these stories about people are just as much 'stories about places' (p. 17). There are specific contextual

differences to living in Oakland, Appalachia, and the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, and yet, ‘even here, the daily lives of the struggling class bear remarkable similarities....to work consistently in a breathtakingly vulnerable situation, with few resources, and with an unfounded hope that you can build a better life’ (p. 40). Place inflects the experience of class, but struggle remains the *leitmotif* across the land.

The next three chapters take on three structural aspects of these struggling lives: predatory business practices, environmental racism/classism, and substance abuse and addiction. These chapters in particular are strong stand-alones that could be used in various sociology courses. Chapter Three documents the high cost of being poor, as in the ‘lower bills and higher costs’ found at dollar stores, where people can buy 16 ounces of milk for \$1 (that’s \$8/gallon!). In Chapter Four, we see how each of the three communities experience their own place-based version of living in a ‘sacrifice zone’ – uranium mining in Standing Rock, lead contamination in Oakland, and the myriad environmental catastrophes associated with mountain top removal and coal mining in Appalachia. In Chapter Five, Pascale documents the painful reality of ‘ordinary’ life, the daily confrontations with drug addiction, gun violence, police brutality, or the ‘Oxy Express’ – a stretch of highway whose single motorists are likely in search of the Sackler drug, or its down-home equivalent.

Together, these three chapters convey how different daily reality is for most struggling Americans than it is for those who read books about them. Inured to violence, unfairness, disaster, people just do the best they can while hoping to survive a little longer. There’s little to no protest, as there is little energy left for that, and precious little expectation of making a difference. Precarious work and low wages fundamentally restructure expectations and understandings about how the world works and what is possible for the future.

Chapters 6 and 7 tackle classism, racism, and gender oppression. One of the refreshing aspects of reading Pascale is her honest accounts of how she stands up to and speaks back to people saying hateful or ignorant things. At one point she explains she tries to do this with love in her heart, but, perhaps because of that, what she ends up saying is often pretty raw and confrontational. I see this as her giving the people she is talking with the respect they deserve; not allowing anyone to get away with saying things that are hurtful just because they themselves may be hurt. In one example, she recounts an increasingly flustered white man as she continues to question him on why his family thought it was alright to call a Black man an insulting name (129-30). In another account, she refuses to accept that joking about the holocaust can ever be ‘in good fun,’ as was explained to her by a Jewish man who suffered these jokes from a white nationalist co-worker (p. 133).

In Chapters Eight and Nine, Pascale tackles professional-middle-class understandings of, respectively, white working-class politics and the myths of meritocracy and social mobility. She marshals data that undercuts the common media narrative that Trump was supported by a racist white working class, showing that he was pretty well supported across the class spectrum. Although she finds plenty of instances of ignorance and racism, she also finds a lot of people rejecting Trump and eschewing politics altogether. If there was one thing in 2016 that most appealed to ‘the struggling class,’ it might have been Trump’s seeming disavowal of politics and politicians. Pascale also reaches further down into the myths that have sustained professional-

middle-class hegemony, the belief that anyone can make it if they try, that our ‘meritocracy’ is fair, that the American Dream is not rather a nightmare for most.

The book concludes with two nicely bookending chapters – one on the future we have now and that took us all by surprise (the Pandemic), and one on the future we want. Pascale was concluding her research when the pandemic hit, so she was able to go back and talk to her interviewees during that really bad year of 2020. Unsurprisingly, she found the pandemic exacerbated inequalities, killing poor people and people of color at higher rates than others and dividing the workforce into ‘essential workers’ (ironically, easily disposable and unprotected) and those privileged to keep their jobs and work safely from home.

All of this bleakness is finally confronted in Chapter 11, ‘The Future We Want.’ Pascale argues that the corporate takeover of our government has undercut the ability of our democracy to function (p. 211). She hopes the pandemic might be the catalyst for change. ‘Moments of crisis are ripe for progressive transformation because they lay bare existing inequalities’ (p. 232). Perhaps. It is hard to have hope in times like ours. But I do take comfort in the fact that people like Pascale are out there, having real conversations with strangers, even difficult conversations and arguments, trying to find a way back to some semblance of community, of a shared democracy, of ‘a land that is made for you and me.’ The first step in our recovery has to be moving out of denial about how badly fractured and hurt we are, combined with an honest naming of the forces to blame for it. This book helps us get out of our denial.

Reviewer Bio

Allison L. Hurst is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Oregon State University. She is the author of *The Burden of Academic Success: Loyalists, Renegades, and Double Agents* (2010), *College and the Working Class* (2012), and *Amplified Advantage: Going to a ‘Good’ School in an Era of Inequality* (2019). She currently serves as the Past-President of the Working-Class Studies Association, and is a member of the American Sociological Association’s Taskforce on First-Generation and Working-Class Persons in Sociology.