

methods made by and for men. Smith and Griffith strongly felt that the traditional social scientific methods of the 1970s “just didn’t do it; it didn’t take up exploration from where the women were in their everyday lives and what they were actually confronting and trying to get changed.”

To put it succinctly, in institutional ethnography sociologists seek to learn from people’s everyday experiences by actually listening to people talk about those experiences. Yet institutional ethnography goes beyond storytelling by seeking to understand how individuals’ experiences are organized into larger social relations. Hence this is a sociological theory and method that moves us beyond the individual, while simultaneously taking the individual seriously. Furthermore, Smith and Griffith stress that terms like social relations and organization must be grounded in real experiences that take place in real local sites among people with real bodies. Abstract concepts and ideas do not have a place in institutional ethnography. Institutional ethnographers are interested in what is actually happening to people in specific places and at specific times. It is not a method to uncover meanings and norms, but rather how actual people live their everyday lives and how together our lives create social organization.

Most importantly, institutional ethnographers believe people are the experts in their own “realities.” Therefore, the goal of institutional ethnography is never to substitute our own understandings or reality for what people already know and have told us. Institutional ethnography is “a sociology *for* rather than *of* people.” This is why Smith and Griffith argue that calling institutional ethnography a method, especially a qualitative method, can be problematic. For Smith and Griffith, pushing back against “standard sociological practices” was part of their mission because they strongly believed these practices did not do justice to or for people.

This book is written for graduate students and researchers interested in pushing back against “traditional” sociology, especially its methodologies. The book seeks to demonstrate how by actually listening to real people in real time we can influence real social change. Smith and Griffith provide a method of understanding the “relations of the

ruling” that allow social scientists to once again become engaged activists for structural change, rather than mere grand theorists putting out generalized ideas and writings that cannot be put into practice or action.

---

*Identity Investments: Middle-Class Responses to Precarious Privilege in Neoliberal Chile*, by **Joel Phillip Stillerman**. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023. 304 pp. \$32.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503634404.

PABLO PÉREZ-AHUMADA  
*University of Chile*  
 pabloper@uchile.cl

---

Class analysts tend to assume that the middle class has certain specific values, orientations, and interests that differentiate it from the wealthy and the poor. In middle-income and developing countries, there is a common view that a strong middle class is essential for the development of stable and cohesive democratic market societies. According to this view, this is because, unlike the wealthy or the poor, the middle class is the backbone of sociopolitical and economic values that emphasize political moderation, human capital accumulation, meritocracy, and entrepreneurialism. As in other parts of the world, in Chile this argument was long used to explain how the high levels of economic growth observed especially in the 1990s and 2000s favored the emergence of a new middle class and, in doing so, reinforced Chileans’ pro-market orientations and political conformism.

However, in the last few years, the rise of anti-neoliberal movements in Chile and other parts of Latin America has prompted analysts to question this view. These analysts have begun to interrogate how middle-class people respond to the economic risks they are exposed to and how, in these contexts, they recreate their class identities. *Identity Investments: Middle-Class Responses to Precarious Privilege in Neoliberal Chile*, by Joel Stillerman, offers a significant contribution to this research agenda. The book interrogates what it means to be middle-class nowadays and how, in neoliberal society, middle-class people respond to their “precarious

privilege”—that is, to their “relative prosperity alongside their fragile hold on their occupational positions” (pp. 9–10).

In *Identity Investments*, Stillerman studies middle-class families in Chile and argues that they respond to their precarious privilege through “identity investments”—that is, through a set of values, motivations, and practices that shape their identity and create symbolic boundaries by guiding people’s decisions in markets such as the labor, housing, school, home decoration, and leisure markets (pp. 6–7). Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Stillerman argues that analyzing identity investments is crucial for understanding how middle-class individuals express their values and commitments through their market behavior. Stillerman also studies identity investments to explain why in Chile upper-middle-class groups are so critical of market-based competition and elitism whereas lower-middle-class people pursue individual advantage. Moreover, going beyond Bourdieu’s class analysis, Stillerman also analyzes the political effects of identity investments, particularly how the diversity of identity investments within the Chilean middle class produces different political behaviors. The examination of these political effects is, I believe, a great contribution for those who are interested in understanding recent Chilean politics (e.g., the transition from intense mobilizations and electoral victories of the Left in 2019 and 2020 to the electoral triumph of radical conservative parties in 2022).

Based on the concept of identity investments, Stillerman proposes a typology of four middle-class groups (“activists,” “moderate Catholics,” “pragmatists,” and “youngsters”), each formed by its own conditions of precarious privilege and identity investments. Drawing on data from a rich and thorough qualitative study conducted in two middle-class neighborhoods in Santiago, Chile, Stillerman develops his argument in six chapters. Each chapter addresses a particular field of identity investment.

The first two chapters focus on families’ access to economic capital through labor (Chapter 1) and housing markets (Chapter 2). Chapter One vividly illustrates the experience of precarious privilege through,

for example, employment in downgraded professions, limited access to high-paid employment, or, in the case of women, gender-based employment barriers. Chapter Two, on the other hand, illustrates the importance of extended family as a source of capital, as determinant of housing choices, and therefore as a central component of identity investments.

The next two chapters focus on school choice (Chapter 3) and social relationships in schools (Chapter 4). Chapter Three shows how values, motivations, and personal histories shape middle-class families’ school choices for their children, and Chapter Four analyzes how schools function as communities and sites of symbolic conflict between these families.

Finally, Chapters Five and Six examine middle-class families’ aesthetic tastes and practices in the home (Chapter 5) and through leisure activities (Chapter 6). Chapter Five illustrates how home decorations reflect middle-class individuals’ values and connections, and Chapter Six shows how, due to time and financial constraints, middle-class families develop distinct patterns of identity investment in cultural consumption and leisure activities (e.g., how they tend to prefer educational consumption and be suspicious of “ostentatious” consumption). This thorough and meticulous description of Chilean middle-class adults is supplemented by a careful examination of differences across communities, which is achieved through a systematic comparison of the upper-middle-class community of Ñuñoa and the suburban community of La Florida.

Although these chapters focus on different fields of investment, they all are tied together by the typology of four middle-class groups proposed by the author. Here lies, I believe, another great contribution of *Identity Investments*. In effect, rather than simply describing how middle-class adults respond to their precarious privilege through identity investments in each of the above-mentioned fields, Stillerman carefully shows how such a response varies greatly depending on the group the families belong to. For example, the author demonstrates that while most middle-class adults are exposed to economic

risks, in the labor market they respond to these risks differently. Activists and moderate Catholics who have gone through turbulent career paths usually experience “hysteresis” in the workplace insofar as they struggle to engage in “shop talk” with their colleagues with whom they did not at first fit in. Therefore, they build their identity in other fields. Activists build their identity by emphasizing their political views and their *political critique* of the wealthy, whereas moderate Catholics do so by emphasizing their family-oriented and religious practices, and their *moral critique* of the upwardly mobile and of the upper class that excludes them.

This does not happen to the other middle-class groups. Youngsters feel comfortable in the workplace as a result of their upward trajectory in their professional fields. Thus, their identity investments are rooted in ordinary consumption and a strong *anti-elitist critique* of the upper classes and the wealthy. Finally, due to their unstable work lives and their difficulties in shielding their children from the poor, pragmatists focus on survival. For this group, identity investments are centered largely on upward mobility projects and on the critique of both the exclusionary attitudes of the wealthy and of the moral depravity of the poor.

All in all, *Identity Investments* provides us with a new and promising angle from which to look at the experiences, values, and practices of middle-class families in contemporary society. Well-written, persuasive, and insightful, I strongly recommend this book for anyone interested in social class, inequality, culture, and neoliberalism.

---

*Love Troubles: Inequality in China and Its Intimate Consequences*, by **Wanning Sun**. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 216 pp. \$115.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781350329607.

KEN SUN  
Villanova University  
kcsun1015@gmail.com

---

Rural-to-urban migrants play an essential role in the economic development of China, but they also bear the brunt of growing social stratification over the course of

modernization. Scholars have long been concerned about the obstacles and barriers that rural migrants confront in urban China, analyzing the ways in which they fulfill their needs, wants, and responsibilities across locales. Calling for an “intimate turn” in the studies of rural-to-urban migrants in China, *Love Troubles: Inequality in China and Its Intimate Consequences* carefully examines how rural migrants’ marital (and romantic) lives are discursively constructed and emotionally experienced. Drawing on her longitudinal ethnographic research in Shenzhen and her analysis of media texts, as well as internal NGO documents, Wanning Sun unpacks the processes whereby rural migrant women and men negotiate gender norms in the face of socio-economic development, new consumer markets, and the state’s political power.

*Love Troubles* contributes to the scholarship on China’s social and spatial stratification by foregrounding power in rural migrants’ pursuit of emotional intimacy. First, Sun delineates the ways the Chinese government constructs rural migrants’ intimate lives as potentially threatening to societal stability and thus strives to address their (un)marriageability. She further points to the roles that China-based social scientists play in reproducing the state’s narratives on rural migrants’ marital problems. These scholars often use or combine two contrasting logics of reasoning: (1) *hukou* (a local registration system that affects individuals’ access to education, health care, employment opportunities, and public benefits) and (2) *suzhi* (the rhetoric that ranks people based on their alleged varying degree of “quality” and cultural disposition) to account for rural migrants’ unmarriageability. As Sun explains, “the clearly external nature of one’s *hukou* status offers a socioeconomic argument against inequality, whereas the complex and putatively internal nature of one’s *suzhi* status can be marshalled to support an argument that defends and justifies inequality” (p. 43). However, resembling the Chinese government, most of these scholars are more interested in governing migrants’ intimate lives from the top down rather than understanding their emotional needs at the grassroots level.