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DO NETWORKS HELP PEOPLE TO MANAGE POVERTY?

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

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In 2018, a staggering 38 million Americans, about one in every nine, faced income poverty. Seventeen million of them experienced deep or extreme poverty, defined as a household income below 50 percent of the household's poverty threshold (Semega et al. 2019). Extreme poverty has almost doubled between 1995 and 2016 (Brady and Parolin 2019). Given the magnitude of the problem both in the United States and worldwide, it is hardly surprising that poverty has had a steady place on the agenda of the social sciences. Nonetheless, not all of its features have received equal attention. A recent literature review of the causes of poverty (Brady 2019) distinguished between three dominant explanations for poverty: individual behaviors and risk factors (e.g., unemployment, single motherhood, cultural schemas, and repertoires guiding behaviors), structural factors (e.g., the economic and demographic context), and power and institutions that create policies affecting poverty rates (e.g., by redistributing resources, investing in capabilities, or “disciplining the poor”). Both structural and institutional explanations have included meso-level factors, such as neighborhoods and organizations. These meso-level conditions have also received attention in other reviews (Desmond and Western 2018; Small and Newman 2001) and special issues (e.g., Allard and Small 2013; Friedrichs, Galster, and Musterd 2003; Lee et al. 2015).

In contrast, a meso-level concept that has received far less attention in such reviews for its role in poverty is that of social networks. This limited attention is surprising, since poverty is profoundly relational (Desmond and Western 2018; Hall 2019; Walker 2014), in the sense that it is lived, managed, negotiated, and reproduced in relationships with others. Research into social networks and poverty has made it clear how important it is to pay attention to the role of networks in how people experience, cope with, and seek to escape poverty. Nonetheless, researchers have come to draw widely diverging conclusions. Some authors have emphasized how networks are an essential survival mechanism, whereas others find that they exacerbate the

risk of social exclusion, and still others present alternative perspectives. It is unclear how these contrasting findings can be consolidated.

This volume aims to push our understanding of the role of social networks in the day-to-day subsistence of families and individuals suffering economic hardship further. We have two objectives: One, we seek to update the literature with new, fieldwork-based evidence on how networks affect how people cope with poverty. Two, we aim to refine and expand on the theoretical processes through which networks are mobilized in times of need. The multiple causal pathways between network conditions and poverty remain only partly mapped out. While many social relationships emerge in organizations in which people routinely participate (Small 2009), little is known about the conditions under which these organizations contribute to the creation of social capital among their clients or participants. The studies and results reported in this volume intend to inform theory, substance, and practice by expanding on the many ways networks are related to poverty.

In this introductory article, we first provide a brief overview of the different types of effects that networks can have on wellbeing. Then, we review the interdisciplinary literature on the role of social networks in coping with poverty, to help the reader to situate the contributions of this special issue. We discuss three contrasting perspectives on networks among the poor that have dominated the literature: pervasive solidarity, pervasive isolation, and selective solidarity (Raudenbush 2016). The perspectives are partly analogous to traditional perspectives on the organization of personal networks in modern society, where community is “saved” (or “found”; Drouhot 2017), “lost,” or “liberated” (Wellman 1979). Then, we outline the contributions of the articles presented in the current volume. The collection of articles provides new evidence and theory of how networks are mobilized in poverty, showing the wide empirical variation in network access and returns among the poor and analyzing the roles of organizational brokerage

and evolving networking practices that may help to explain contrasting outcomes. We conclude with a brief discussion of pathways for future research.

Network effects and wellbeing

In their daily lives, people interact with partners, relatives, friends, bosses, workmates, and other acquaintances in similar and different economic conditions. These relationships can give access to valuable resources, including money and goods, information, time and skills, counsel and consolation (e.g., Taylor 2011), and obtaining access to them may be an important ingredient of coping strategies (e.g., Adler de Lomnitz 1975; Desmond and Gershenson 2016; Edin and Lein 1997; González de la Rocha 1994; Newman 1999; Stack 1974) as well as an aid for social mobility (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Granovetter 1973). The vast literatures on *social capital* and *social support* have uncovered how resources are exchanged in networks (Lin 2001; Cohen, Underwood, and Gottlieb 2000). Intimate relationships, such as kin and close friends, are thought to give most emotional support, care and tangible assistance, but acquaintances can complement those relationships in many ways (Fingerman 2009; Small 2017). Networked individuals can also coordinate their actions and share resources to achieve *collective efficacy* (Sampson 2004) and to *pool risks* (Fafchamps and Gubert 2007). For example, villagers in the global south often protect themselves against health and income shocks by sharing crops with relatives, neighbors and friends, providing mutual labor services, or starting a common fund for costly, unforeseeable events such as funerals (e.g., Fafchamps and Gubert 2007).

Still, the impact of networks is not one-dimensional. Networks can just as well drain resources, as implied by the concept of *negative social capital* (Portes 1998), i.e., “the pressure on an individual actor to incur costs by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (O’Brien 2012, 378). Social relationships serve as conduits for not only social support but also values, norms, social pressure, and control. Through social learning and normative

pressure, people may adopt either beneficial or harmful coping strategies. Furthermore, *structural violence* (Farmer 2004; Galtung 1969), i.e., “the methodical and often subtle processes through which social structures disadvantage and harm certain groups of people” (Hodgetts et al. 2014, 3) is reproduced and normalized in everyday interactions, “essentially cementing the disadvantage initiated by larger macro- and meso-level forces” (Smith 2010, 4). In this regard, interpersonal relations also play a role in *shaming*, *stigma*, and *exploitation* (e.g., Del Real 2019; Levine 2013). For example, family and friends can be judgmental about a person’s welfare reliance rather than supportive, thereby replicating and normalizing state and public discourse about the causes of poverty. In sum, networks can have intricate effects on individual wellbeing.

Social Networks and Poverty

Pervasive solidarity

Contemporary research on the role of social networks in the day-to-day subsistence of the poor in cities can be traced back to two pioneering books, one published closely after the other. Both give ethnographic accounts of poor families that are in sharp contrast with Lewis’s theory of the “culture of poverty” (1959, 1998), which posits that negative features such as personal and family disorganization cause persistent poverty. Although the theory has been criticized for various reasons (see, e.g., Bourgois 2001; Lamont and Small 2008; Ryan 1971; Streib et al. 2016), its basic assumptions continue to be visible in behavioral theories of the causes of poverty (Brady 2019) and in punitive welfare policies.

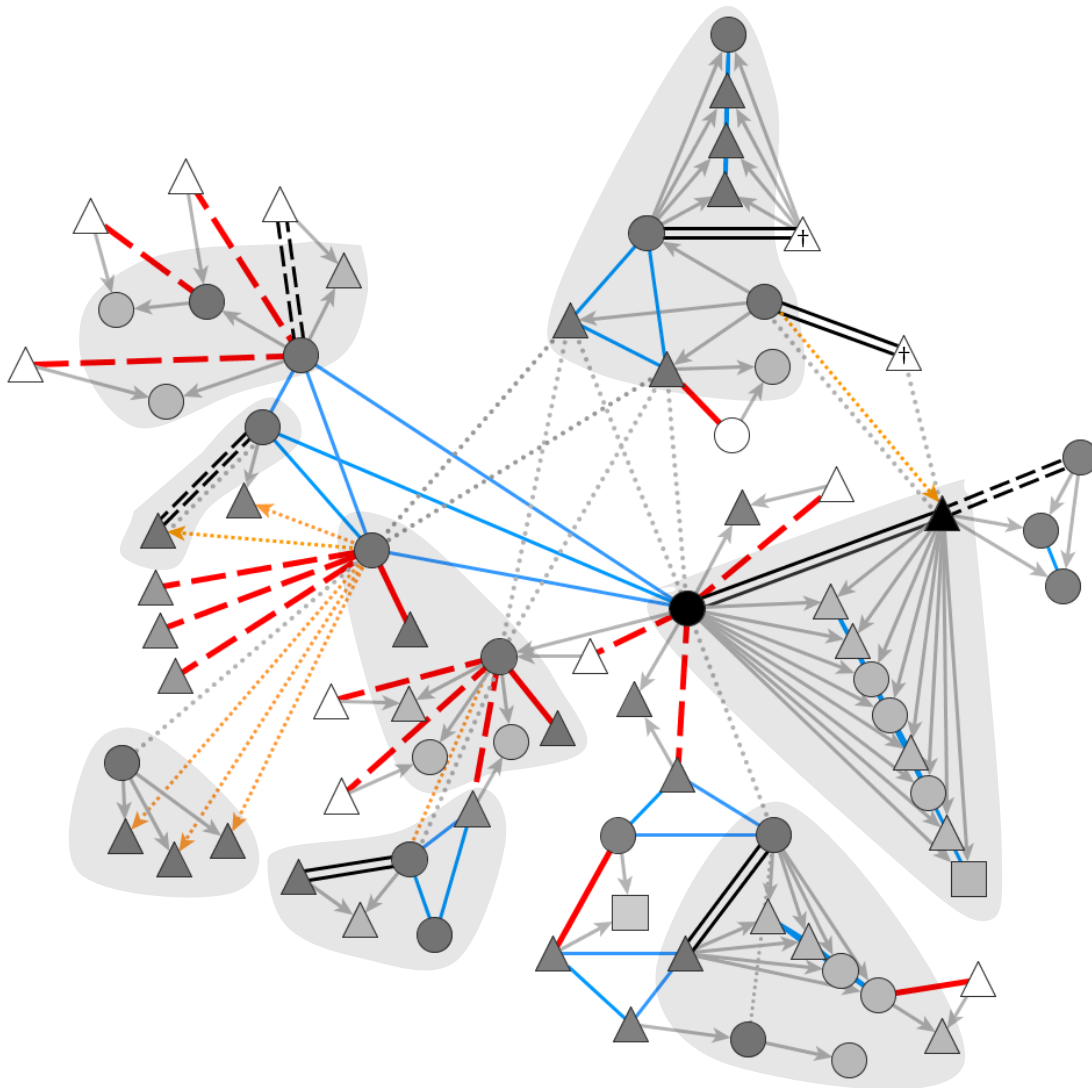
The first of the two books is *All Our Kin*, written by anthropologist Carol Stack (1974), now a classic in the field of urban poverty and social networks. Stack performed three years of ethnographic fieldwork in an income-poor, African American neighborhood in a Midwestern city in the United States, starting in 1968. She observed that the people in this neighborhood

managed to survive economic hardship by building upon extensive domestic networks of exchange that were local and mainly kin-based. Within these networks, “food stamps, rent money, a TV, hats, dice, a car, a nickel here, a cigarette there, food, milk, grits and children” (1974, 32) were exchanged. Figure 1 illustrates one such domestic network, from the point of view of a married couple, Magnolia and Calvin Waters, as narrated and visualized in different ways by Stack. The figure shows that at least forty adults were reported to participate in the system of exchanges. Most of them were divided over eight local households with fluid boundaries (often extended families), tied to the couple by real and *fictive kinship* ties, close friendships, and children. The exchanges were seemingly voluntary, but participation in these networks required reciprocation. “Sometimes I don’t have a damn dime in my pocket, not a crying penny to get a box of paper diapers, milk, a loaf of bread,” explained Magnolia’s daughter, a young single mother with three children. “But you have to have help from everybody and anybody,” she continued, “so don’t turn no one down when they come round for help” (Stack 1974, 32).

The system of generalized reciprocity underlying the extensive networks reported by Stack revealed a high level of family organization, contrasting the culture of poverty theory. Mutual sharing was enforced by social control and community sanctions. Even though these systems formed an important survival strategy, Stack (1974) warned that the obligations they created toward kith and kin made it impossible for people to create surpluses, thus making escape from poverty difficult.

FIGURE 1.

Illustration of the domestic network of Magnolia and Calvin Waters,
as explained by Carol Stack in “All our Kin” (1974).



Legend

Node color

- Member of focal couple
- Adult participant
- Child (< 18 years of age)
- Adult non-participant (ex-partners or deceased)

Node shape

- Male
- Female
- Gender unknown
- † Deceased

Edge color and shape

- A B A and B are married
- A B A and B are divorced
- A B A and B have consensual relationship
- A B Past consensual relationship
- A B A and B are siblings
- A B A is parent of B
- A B A and B are friends
- A B A is a caregiver to B

Shaded Area

- Domestic unit (household), April 1969

Note: Own elaboration based on Stack’s description on pages 94-100 and her Charts C and D. There are small deviations between Stack’s text and her graphs, such that the presented graph is approximate.

Concurrently, anthropologist Larissa Adler de Lomnitz published *Cómo Sobreviven los Marginados* (1975), later translated into English as *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown* (1977). Based on surveys and ethnographic fieldwork done between 1969 and 1971, the study described how internal migrants residing in Cerrada del Cóndor, a shanty town in Mexico City, coped with poverty. The most important of three observed strategies for survival was reciprocity, the sharing of favors and scarce resources with local family members and neighbors in similar situations, a strategy for which it was imperative to form dense, local social networks of trust. Fictive kinship (*compadrazgo*, i.e. godparenthood) and strong male bonds (*cuatismo*) were created to strengthen these networks. Like Stack, Adler de Lomnitz showed that these networks guaranteed survival, but they did not lift people out of poverty. The book started a large tradition of studies in social support and poverty in Latin America (see for an early review Enríquez-Rosas [2001]) that is often overlooked by the English-speaking academic community investigating the networks-poverty nexus.

Stack's and Adler de Lomnitz's studies, conducted in distinct cultural settings, laid the foundations for later research into social networks and poverty (e.g., Bazán Levy 1998; Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Edin and Lein 1997; González de la Rocha 1986, 1994; Paugam and Zoyem 1998). This research has benefited from the simultaneously emerging theories of social support (e.g., Kahn and Antonucci 1980; Wills 1985), social capital (e.g., Lin and Dumin 1986; Portes 1998) and personal networks (e.g., Fischer 1982; Wellman 1979). Much of the empirical work confirmed the relevance of informal support for people experiencing poverty. For example, Newman (1999) observed that the working poor, both native-born and immigrants, relied on extended family networks of the type described by Stack. "None of them would have been able to manage these responsibilities [of earning a living and raising children] were it not for the fact that each in turn has made the extended family the core of her life," Newman noticed (1999, 196). She also acknowledged the role of typically older, welfare-recipient

neighbors in the collective efficacy of dealing with poverty in some neighborhoods, by “keep[ing] watch over children and property, while the working poor are on the job” (Newman 1999, 223). Others reaffirmed that low-income mothers in poverty draw upon extensive networks, including relatives, close friends, boyfriends, and children’s fathers for their survival (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Edin and Lein 1997; Henly, Danziger, and Offer 2005; Nelson 2005), while these networks simultaneously impede social mobility (Domínguez and Watkins 2003; Henly, Danziger, and Offer 2005). Edin and Lein (1997) estimated the financial contribution of these networks to household budgets. Using interviews and detailed budgetary analyses of nearly 400 low-income mothers, they found that a substantial portion of the total budget of welfare-reliant mothers (17 percent) and low-income wage-reliant mothers (21 percent) came from unreported gifts from network members. More recently, Raudenbush (2020) showed that low-income African Americans who were cut off from formal healthcare also used their social networks to access medicines, medical equipment, and insurance cards. This access could improve their health, but moving beyond formal healthcare could also seriously harm it. Research in former Soviet states documents similar extensive support systems, named *blat*, i.e., the “use of personal networks for obtaining goods and services in short supply and for circumventing formal procedures” (Ledeneva 2009, 257; cf. Caldwell 2004; Ledeneva 1998).

Together, this body of research shows that people in poverty consistently use extensive networks of kin (often matrifocal) and other close relationships, mostly with people in similar economic conditions, to compensate for a lack of resources, adopting systems of generalized reciprocity. A parallel can be drawn with Wellman’s concept of “community saved” or “found” (Drouhot 2017; Wellman 1979), in which typically densely knit, local networks give ample social support on the basis of communal solidarity. The blending of the social and economic spheres reported in this literature may be surprising, but researchers have long established that economic activity is an integral part of intimate relationships in all societal strata (Zelizer 2005).

Pervasive isolation

Nevertheless, various scholars have challenged the assumption that the poor can rely on family networks for their survival (e.g., González de la Rocha 2007; Roschelle 1997). Some have called for more attention to the “disastrous consequences” (Roschelle 1997, vii) that policies based on such an “untrue, but also perilous” (González de la Rocha 2007, 48) assumption could have for the many people who do not have such networks. This work suggests that support networks have eroded in contemporary societies, and that people in poverty are mostly on their own. Indeed, some large-scale surveys have shown that the poor, who most need informal support, are the least likely to have it (e.g., Böhnke 2008; Harknett and Hartnett 2011).

The network disadvantage reported in this body of research is a result of both lower *network access*, that is, the poor may have a lower number of resources embedded in their networks (also called *network poverty*; O’Brien 2012; van Eijk 2010), and lower *network returns*, whereby the poor may have similar access but obtain fewer benefits from their networks (Pedulla and Pager 2019). The first, network access, depends on the size and composition of support networks. Empirical evidence shows that support networks shrink after entry in poverty (Böhnke and Link 2017; Mood and Jonsson 2016), and that the poor have smaller networks than the more affluent (Marques 2012; van Eijk 2010). Furthermore, processes of *homophily* (i.e., the tendency to form social ties with people with similar characteristics, McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), intergenerational transmission of poverty, and geographical segregation mean that the networks of low-income individuals typically comprise equally resource-poor individuals (e.g., Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998), limiting network access. This was vividly illustrated by Mahler (1995), who showed that poor Central and South American immigrants in the United States did not have the financial resources to give support to one another, and lost the systems of reciprocity they had had in their countries of origin as a result. However, they believed that their compatriots were unwilling rather than unable to help them (i.e., they believed they had

network access, but not returns), creating environments of distrust. Similarly, Menjívar (2000) demonstrated that income-insecure Salvadorian immigrants in the United States could not provide the support to recent immigrants they are normatively expected to give, due to economic scarcity; she labeled such relationships “fragmented ties.” The network poverty had negative repercussions in the creation of social capital in the community of co-nationals.

A second potential source of network disadvantage, network returns, implies that individuals in poverty are not able to benefit from the resources that are embedded in their networks (Pedulla and Pager 2019). Newman (1988), for example, found that downwardly mobile individuals had relationships with middle-class people who had sufficient resources, but it was difficult for these individuals to keep up with their friends’ costly lifestyles. While friends invited them at first without expecting much in return, “eventually the unspoken rules of reciprocity put an end to that” (Newman 1988, 3). More generally, Offer (2012) argued that the expectation and obligation to reciprocate hinder the participation of the poorer sections of society in informal exchange networks. In her study, poor women in Israel were either excluded from support networks, to avoid resource drain, or they withdrew themselves from networks to avoid exhausting other people’s resources or being stigmatized. Wherry, Seefeldt, and Alvarez (2018) showed how potential help providers often refused to give help that might not be reciprocated or otherwise limited it to avoid resource drain.

Other motivations also explain limited network returns. Smith (2005, 2010) showed that unemployed African Americans tended to know employed peers who held relevant job information that could help them get ahead, but they were often let down when they asked them for job referrals (Marin 2012; Newman 1999). Potential job referrers tended to be worried about their own reputations with their bosses, and only helped people they believed were trustworthy, with whom they had strong ties, or when the two were embedded in densely connected networks (among other explanatory factors). Consequently, to avoid rejection, job seekers obtained an

attitude of “defensive individualism” (Smith 2010), choosing not to reach out to people who might be able to help them.

Poverty spells can also widen the income or power gap in dyadic relationships, which makes them less sustainable, as people run out of things to share (Newman 1988). But these gaps also create other difficulties. First, the difference in resources between two people may lead the lower-income person to feel shame. Many scholars have noted the association between poverty and shame (Baumberg 2016; Walker 2014; Lister 2016). Lavee and Offer (2012) show that low-income women in Israel only see themselves as deserving of informal support if they are or have been economically productive, with which they reproduce the common discourse regarding welfare recipients’ deservingness of formal support. Out of shame, benefit recipients in the UK often decide not to disclose their recipient status to their loved ones, to avoid being stigmatized (Garthwaite 2015). As a result, many are wary about activating their networks for support.

Second, differentials in power or income can create “dangerous dependencies” (Scott, London, and Myers 2002) in personal relationships. Lavee (2016) found that isolation led (mostly single) low-income mothers in Israel to depend materially on men with more resources, in exchange for sex. Whether these relationships were disguised as partnerships or not, the women, according to Lavee, commodified their bodies to obtain help for their families. Lavee explicitly rejects conceptualizing such exchanges as social support and calls this survival strategy “the slippery slope of dependency.”

Third, these differences can generate distrust. For example, Levine (2013) observed that low-income mothers in the United States distrusted bosses, case workers, child care providers, boyfriends, and even family members, as these relationships were either characterized by a power differential, which could expose them to mistreatment, or by unaligned interests. This impeded the women’s use of childcare, them getting married, or getting a job, and thus limited their

chances of upward mobility. Similarly, a New Zealand study observed that the poor perceived case workers as abusive, disrespectful, disinterested, and judgmental, scrutinizing every aspect of a person's life in exchange for social support (Hodgetts et al. 2014). Finally, Del Real (2019) reported how low-income undocumented immigrants in Southern California had what she called "toxic ties" with documented partners, relatives, and friends, i.e., relationships that are intentionally or unintentionally exploitative, demeaning, or abusive as a result of the power differential in these relationships (see also Offer and Fischer [2018] for research on difficult ties). They could be reported by them, robbed without the legal means to press charges, or otherwise exploited. In this sense, these relationships reproduce what researchers have called the legal violence that the state's immigration laws inflict on them (Menjívar and Abrego 2012).

In sum, the work described in this section suggests that the poor cannot rely on their networks for support in the same way that the more affluent can, due to restricted network access and returns. Support can exacerbate vulnerabilities and create shame and distrust, encouraging people to cope with adversity mostly individually. This body of research suggests that the relationship between poverty and networks may contribute to cumulative disadvantage (DiMaggio and Garip 2011). We can draw a parallel with Wellman's "community lost" perspective (Wellman 1979; Drouhot 2017), where social solidarity has eroded in impersonal, unstable communities.

Selective solidarity

Why do empirical studies find such divergent models for social support in poverty? Has pervasive solidarity become a thing of the past (Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg 1993), when networks were mostly dense and local (Wellman 1979), family structures more extensive, and employment opportunities more widespread (e.g., González de la Rocha 2007)? Do some people in poverty encounter solidarity while others in similar circumstances face isolation (Klärner and

Knabe 2019; Marques 2012), and, if so, what explains this difference? Or can solidarity and individualism coexist in the same individuals or communities?

Raudenbush (2016) argued that solidarity and distrust are two frames for thinking that can be adopted by the same individuals toward different people. To capture this compatibility, the author introduced a third perspective, which she called “selective solidarity,” based on fieldwork among African Americans in a public housing development in a large U.S. city. In contrast to Stack’s informants, most individuals interviewed by Raudenbush talked about “staying to themselves” more than they did in the past due to neighborhood violence and instability, although they still selectively mobilized ties with friends or neighbors for much needed social support.

Other studies also found aspects of both solidarity and distrust in the same communities, even though in different forms than observed by Raudenbush (2016). For example, Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a community of homeless injection drug users living around “Edgewater Boulevard” (fictive street name) in San Francisco—a case of extreme poverty and vulnerability. The homeless men and women of this community had varying relationships with their families: Some had parents who always welcomed them in their homes, others had conflict-ridden relationships with family or were abused by them in the past, and still others were completely estranged from them. Among themselves, however, they had constructed a community, where reciprocity and moral economy coincided with deep distrust for the *same* network members (in contrast to Raudenbush [2016]). As the authors explained, “Begging, working, scavenging, and stealing, the Edgewater homeless balance on a tightrope of mutual solidarity and betrayal as they scramble for their next shot of heroin, their next meal, their next place to sleep, and their sense of dignity—all the while keeping a wary eye out for the police” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 9–10). Since most heroin injectors were unable to

survive on their own, they relied on others. However, “gifts often go hand in hand with rip-offs” (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, 9–10).

Another variant of the selective solidarity perspective was given by Desmond (2012), who studied evicted tenants living in a trailer park in Milwaukee. They too faced chronic poverty and destitution. Their cases showed neither pervasive solidarity nor complete isolation. Evicted tenants tended to have financially heterogeneous families, with some relatives experiencing similar and others better conditions. “Every tenant I met relied on kinfolk for some kind of assistance,” Desmond wrote, “Yet to meet their most pressing needs (e.g., food, shelter, child care), tenants often relied more extensively on disposable ties than on relatives” (2012, 1305). He used the term “disposable ties” to label a type of tie that has features of both strong (intimate) and weak (superficial) ties. It refers to newly created relationships that are rapidly thickened to increase the exchange of support, reaching high levels of closeness, contact frequency and support, but these ties also rapidly burn out due to excessive demands. While they contributed to day-to-day survival, they also increased the instability in individuals’ lives.

Together, these studies parallel some aspects of Wellman’s “liberated community” (Wellman 1979), in the sense that they evoke loosely knit and transient social networks, with narrow, mostly specialized support exchanged in one-on-one relationships. Such networks are difficult to maintain without sufficient resources (Drouhot 2017), such as in poverty. Therefore, the picture that the studies in this section paint diverts from Wellman’s description of liberated communities.

In sum, the literature provides contrasting but also partially complementary perspectives on the importance of social support networks in the daily survival of the poor. The observed differences may be explained by the characteristics of the populations under study (e.g., single mothers, evicted tenants, the working poor, recent immigrants, homeless drug users, the

downwardly mobile, each with varying degrees of economic needs), by the macro-level conditions under which they were studied (e.g., different welfare structures, family structures, and levels of geographical mobility), or perhaps even by the various research methods (Raudenbush 2016). For example, by using ethnographic fieldwork, forming part of concrete households, and conducting participant observation, Stack may have observed higher levels of support than others. More research is needed to understand under which conditions social support networks can be sustainable in poverty, and how this sustainability can be improved.

About This Volume

Researchers have investigated the role of social networks in poverty over the past 50 years, and together these studies have shown that, depending on local conditions, (1) networks can both aid the survival of poverty and hinder upward social mobility; (2) networks can fail to be a source of effective support among the poor, leading to isolation, vulnerability, or relational dependencies; and (3) solidarity can co-exist with isolation and distrust, even within the same relationships. This volume aims to improve the theoretical and evidence base on these findings. The volume is distinct from previous research in two ways.

First, it adopts an international perspective, presenting studies from the United States, Mexico, the UK, Spain, Turkey, and Germany. This viewpoint can shed light on the particularity or universalism of the association between social networks and poverty, as social networks function in part as a reaction to macro-level conditions (e.g., Ledeneva 2009). Moreover, an international perspective can help poverty researchers to examine the limits of adopting national policy-based assumptions, categories, and classifications and presuming these to be universal (Wacquant 2002). This kind of reflexivity has benefitted migration scholars, who have questioned, among other things, the naturalization of differences between migrants and citizens and of national borders (Dahinden 2016; Nowicka and Cieslik 2013; Wimmer and Glick Schiller

2002; Lubbers, Verdery, and Molina 2020). An international perspective should be equally important to poverty researchers.

Second, the work presented here is multidisciplinary; contributors include sociologists, anthropologists, economists, social geographers, and criminologists. Though all papers are either based on or directly informed by fieldwork, the research methods used range from ethnographic observation and qualitative interviews to structured network measurement, surveys, and financial diaries. Qualitative and quantitative methods complement one another in important ways in poverty research (see Small 2011). In this context, qualitative methods bring light to the complexity of the lived experiences of people in poverty (Newman and Massengill 2006), to the meaning people attach to their circumstances, and to the complex mechanisms through which they use or fail to use their networks. Such methods also often give voice to populations who do not commonly participate in policy-making nor in academic discourse. Quantitative methods allow for breadth, for comparison across cases and over time, and for the contextualization of cases in larger social patterns.

The volume is organized around three themes: (1) the nature of exchange relations in the networks of the poor, (2) the role of organizations in the networks of the poor, and (3) the relation between poverty and other disadvantages in the networks of the poor.

The nature of exchange relations in the networks of the poor

The first section examines the nature of exchange relations in personal networks among the poor. Mercedes González de la Rocha begins with a conceptual article informed by decades of fieldwork that she has conducted in Mexico. She shows that, as a result of increases in poverty, social support has become increasingly commodified, where people expect that support must be remunerated. She discusses how this tendency exacerbates social exclusion.

The second article is again on the connection between economic and social relations (Zelizer 2005). While research has shown that social support matters, there is little evidence on the daily and weekly volume of financial exchanges among people in poverty (but see Edin and Lein 1997). Olga Biosca, Rachel Baker, Cam Donaldson, Fatma Ibrahim, and Neil McHugh use unique data based on financial diaries over a six-month period to understand the extent to which financial support contributes to the day-to-day subsistence of forty-five income-insecure individuals in the UK. Consistent with the selective solidarity perspective, they find that the diarists use the social capital embedded in their networks of family members and friends both pervasively and strategically. Over six months, diarists exchanged an average of £870 (approximately 1,143 USD) with one or a small number of family members and friends, who usually experienced similar economic conditions and lived nearby.

In the third article, Miranda Lubbers, Hugo Valenzuela García, Paula Escribano Castaño, José Luis Molina, Antònia Casellas, and Jorge Grau Rebollo examine why some individuals manage to get support and others do not. The authors present findings from a mixed-methods research among sixty-one households in Spain, a country with a Mediterranean welfare system that is based on the assumption that the family is the main provider of welfare. The authors find that network access and returns vary greatly between households. Many networks are however less densely connected and more transient and individualistic than those described by Stack and Adler de Lomnitz. In these conditions, support provision transforms the network by violating its norms, such that prolonged a-reciprocal support often leads to conflicts and rejection.

The role of organizations in the networks of the poor

The second group of articles examines the brokerage roles that organizations may have in the creation of social capital for low-income individuals. Social capital results not only from individual agency but also from the opportunities for interaction that people obtain within the

context of routine organizations, such as schools, work places, associations, food banks, child care centers, and libraries (Small 2006, 2009; Klinenberg 2018). While past ethnographic research within charity organizations has shown that support obtained within institutions often goes substantially beyond what is formally intended (Caldwell 2004; Glasser 1988; Grau Rebollo et al. 2019), less attention has been paid to the factors that determine the level of nonintended, informal support, and particularly factors that allow such support to flow. Scholarly attention to the institutional practices of local and community organizations can help us to understand networks as they manifest themselves in practice.

In the first article of this section, Mario Luis Small and Leah Gose propose a model of the role of routine organizations in the creation of social capital. Building on brokerage theory and based on an extensive review of published field studies, the authors seek to identify the conditions under which routine organizations can significantly contribute to social capital formation among low-income populations. They argue that successful brokerage depends, in part, on the extent to which institutional norms render social interaction among members frequent, long-lasting, focused on others, and centered on joint tasks. The ensuing ties may stimulate generalized reciprocity, a sense of belonging, and access to other organizations.

Joan Maya Mazelis examines a specific case where social capital is successfully created within an organization for people who hardly obtained support from their personal relationships. Based on long-term ethnographic work and qualitative interviews (Mazelis 2017), the author observes that a grassroots organization for people experiencing poverty, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU) in Philadelphia, helps to build a sustainable support network among its members. The organization does not have external funds and can thus only succeed if members collaborate—in turn, collective action is successful and creates supportive bilateral ties among members of the KWRU. This article is consistent with Small and Gose’s model: the organization demands frequent presence at the office and at rallies, even if there is not always a lot to do, the

adherence to the organization tends to be long-lasting, and the organization gives its members joint tasks of activism and encourages mutual help. Mazelis also finds that the sustainability of these ties is further enhanced by fictive kinship processes and organizational conflict mediation.

Finally, Paul Stretesky, Michael Long, and Margaret Anne Defeyter focus on British “holiday clubs,” community-based institutions that attenuate the hunger experienced by children during the summer holidays, when the children lack access to school lunches. These organizations provide food, but also, as the authors argue, a broad range of activities and other services that are beneficial for resource-scarce households. Based on mixed-methods research in seventeen holiday clubs in North East England, the authors show that holiday clubs broker access to important community networks to help residents living in disadvantaged areas. Their capacity to broker these resources depends to some extent on the personal networks of volunteers and staff.

The relation between poverty and other disadvantages in the networks of the poor

The last set of articles explores the social support networks of populations facing particular challenges in addition to poverty.

Ezgi Güler presents an ethnographic study of social support among a group of transgender female sex workers who compete for clients in a major city in Turkey. The women endure physical and structural violence in their work and lives; many are estranged from their families. Güler examines whether the women manage to develop supportive relations given the competitive nature of their interactions. She finds high levels of cooperation around safety and even economic resources, but the support was often selective, and relationships as sources of support tended to be precarious and rife with conflict.

Social support is often affected by national regulations, which can remain invisible in studies of a single nation state. Başak Bilecen examines social support transnationally among

Turkish immigrants in Germany and family and friends of these migrants “left behind” in Turkey. She finds that while German social welfare schemes give Turkish immigrants a more secure income, increasing their ability to send remittances, residency-based social policies also limit their ability to provide care to family members in their country of origin. The welfare schemes of Germany alter the power balance in transnational personal relations, giving migrants the “upper hand” in family decisions.

The volume concludes with a thoughtful commentary by Katherine Newman, whose numerous books on downward mobility (Newman 1988), the working poor (Newman 1999), and retirement insecurity (Newman 2019) touch on many of the issues discussed here. Newman expertly locates the articles of this special issue in the larger social and social scientific context and raises a number of thought-provoking questions for future research.

Thinking Ahead

The articles in this volume show that the nexus between social networks and poverty is highly complex. Social support networks can and do provide much needed emotional, material, and financial help and services to those in poverty, but sustained poverty and a-reciprocal material and financial support can also erode networks, augmenting isolation and the social exclusion that poor people already experience in other sectors of their lives. Family relationships are particularly vulnerable in this aspect. In this sense, mobilizing networks is like walking on thin ice: People may go a long way with what networks can provide, but the network can also easily fall apart.

Given the many people in poverty and the continuing rise in inequality (Grusky and MacLean 2016; Lamont and Pierson 2019), policies can be developed that strengthen, on one hand, the social support networks of vulnerable populations to reduce isolation and exclusion, and on the other, the welfare systems on which the poor depend. The work in this volume suggests that routine organizations can help to provide the “infrastructure” for creating and

strengthening social networks (Klinenberg 2018). The work also suggests that welfare policies could be better aligned with the precarity, instability, and income volatility in the lives of the poor. Future research could help to further policy developments by studying the association between social networks and poverty in particular interventions or around important changes in welfare schemes. For example, various European countries have been experimenting with a universal basic income. The works in this volume make clear that such interventions will almost certainly have consequences for the networks of the poor, shaping not only household budgets but also broader communities of exchange relations. Broader attention to such interactions will help us to understand the vulnerabilities to which people in poverty are exposed.

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Note

ⁱ Calculated with the conversion rate of 1,3133 that was current as of September 1, 2016, the midpoint of the data collection period.