Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

<http://spr.sagepub.com>

Draining or gaining? The social networks of public housing movers in Boston

Alexandra M. Curley

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships 2009; 26; 227

DOI: 10.1177/0265407509106716

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://spr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/26/2-3/227>

Published by:

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

[International Association for Relationship Research](#)

Additional services and information for *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://spr.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://spr.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://spr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/26/2-3/227>

Draining or gaining? The social networks of public housing movers in Boston

Alexandra M. Curley

Delft University of Technology

ABSTRACT

The social networks of low-income residents have been simultaneously described as supportive, strained, localized, and limited in providing access to necessary resources and information. Using a longitudinal qualitative approach, this study investigated the social networks of low-income women in one US high-poverty public housing project. Existing sociological frameworks for studying networks did not fully capture the women's social ties, particularly their "draining" ties. As the women were relocated as part of a mixed-income housing initiative targeting their neighborhood, a changing flow of resources and stress passed through social ties. A change in neighborhood prompted changes in low-income people's social networks far different than expected. Findings also raise questions about the importance of weak or bridging ties in linking low-income women with mobility opportunities.

KEY WORDS: concentrated poverty • draining • housing mobility • leverage • relocation • social networks • support

Urban poverty researchers have provided mixed images of social relationships in poverty and ethnically concentrated communities. Several well-known ethnographic studies describe well-functioning social networks where residents carefully navigate relationships to exchange resources and look

This research was supported by a Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. I would like to thank the Maverick women who participated in this study and Jennifer Murillo for her superb assistance in conducting interviews in Spanish. I would also like to thank my colleagues at OTB for their comments on an earlier draft. Address correspondence to Alexandra M. Curley, Jaffalaan 9, 2628 BX, Delft, The Netherlands [e-mail: acurley22@gmail.com]. Stephen Marks was the Action Editor on this article.

Journal of Social and Personal Relationships Copyright © 2009 SAGE Publications
(www.sagepublications.com), Vol. 26(2–3): 227–247. DOI: 10.1177/0265407509106716

out for one another (Gans, 1962; Stack, 1974), while at the same time they and others (Briggs, 1998; Portes & Landolt, 1996; Wilson, 1987) suggest that these social networks can also be localized, insular, and can essentially block residents' prospects for upward mobility. Despite the complexity of low-income people's social worlds, some researchers and policymakers believe that dispersing poverty through relocation or mixed-income initiatives will help improve poor people's "life chances," in part, by diversifying their social networks. This paper takes a detailed look at the social networks of low-income women from one high-poverty public housing project and assesses network changes that occurred when they relocated as part of an initiative aimed at redeveloping such developments into mixed-income communities.

Early research and theory

Early ethnographic research paints a picture of low-income people's social networks as both supportive and strained. Carol Stack (1974) documented how African-American women responded to poverty, joblessness, single parenthood, and inadequate government assistance through mutual solidarity, the sharing of goods, and reciprocal assistance. Others have similarly found tight functioning social networks in low-income communities that provide an important safety net for the poor, and as such are an important community asset (Edin & Lein, 1997; Vale, 2002). Liebow (1967) and Rainwater (1970) described relationships among urban poor men as supportive, but also marked by suspicion, mistrust, and ambivalence. These authors suggested that conditions of poverty undermined long-lasting relationships. Along the same line, Belle (1982) found in her study of low-income women's networks, that "social ties proved to be a two-edged sword, associated with important forms of assistance and emotional support and yet also associated with troubling worries, upset, and concern" (p. 141-142). Thus, while many studies document the supportive nature of low-income people's social networks, they also acknowledge that such networks can at the same time be insular, negative, and discourage upward mobility.

Wilson (1987) argued that poor urban neighborhoods isolate residents from middle-class people and employed role models, limiting their access to important job networks and mainstream norms pertaining to work, family, and community (Briggs, 1998; Wilson, 1987). In essence, residents of such communities are thought to be deficient in *social capital*, which has been defined as the resources that are available through social networks and relationships based on trust, shared norms, and reciprocity (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Briggs (1998) conceptualizes social capital as having two key network dimensions: supportive social ties that help individuals "get by" in life and bridging ties that provide individuals with leverage to help them "get ahead." Putnam (2000) distinguishes "bonding" from "bridging" social capital, where bonds typically connect people who are alike, and bridges connect those who are different from one another.

Some studies have suggested that having diverse social networks that include ties to people of different socioeconomic status and ethnicity can be important for accessing information and resources to get ahead (Briggs, 1998). Granovetter's (1974) research supports this reasoning with his finding that people most often find jobs through weak rather than close ties. Thus, there is "strength in weak ties" because weak ties channel new and different sources of information. Living in a poverty-concentrated neighborhood is thought to limit such information flows since residents are most likely to meet and interact with other disadvantaged people. People living in high-poverty communities have social networks that are more homogeneous and dense than those in low-poverty areas, suggesting that information on jobs and other opportunities may be more redundant in high-poverty neighborhoods (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003; Smith, 1995). In his study of low-income Latino and African-American youth, Briggs (1998) found that those who had wider and more diverse networks had more access to job information. Poor urban residents were often found to have insular and localized social networks that offered little opportunity for advancement (Tigges, Browne, & Green, 1998; Wacquant & Wilson, 1989; Wilson, 1987, 1996).

While research supports the link between neighborhood poverty and limited social networks, a number of studies offer conflicting evidence. One study found that "public housing does not significantly affect social network structure or characteristics, and has no effect on the likelihood of finding a job through word of mouth" (Reingold, Van Ryzin, & Ronda, 2001, p. 489). A study on Chicago found that neighborhood poverty concentration did not have an effect on the size or composition of social networks among African-American men, yet it did have a negative effect on the social networks of African-American women (Tigges et al., 1998). It is important to note that most neighborhood effects studies have focused on the African-American urban poor, raising questions about the generalizability of their findings to other racial and ethnic groups. Three notable exceptions include Briggs (1998), Dominguez and Watkins (2003), and Small (2004), all of whom studied Latino populations.

There is also growing inquiry into what happens to low-income individuals' networks when they relocate out of high-poverty areas. Attention to this issue was prompted with the development of programs across the US and Europe designed to relocate poor people in an effort to deconcentrate poverty, create mixed-income neighborhoods, and improve the life-chances of the poor. Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) and Moving to Opportunity (MTO) are two such programs in the US that have relocated tens of thousands of low-income families from high-poverty communities in the past decade.

Most studies evaluating the effects of housing relocation programs do not include analyses of residents' social networks, and those that do tend to look at networks at only one point in time, making it impossible to assess changes over time. In general, this limited research suggests that relocation often breaks up strong social networks and results in less social support for residents (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; Gans, 1962; Goetz, 2003; Greenbaum,

2002; Popkin et al., 2004; Saegert & Winkel, 1998). Few studies have concluded that relocation helps improve low-income residents' opportunities for social mobility by improving access to social capital and diversifying social networks. One study found that moving to a low-poverty neighborhood did increase adults' chances of having college-educated and higher-income friends – the types of people thought to be lacking in the social worlds of low-income people living in high-poverty areas (Kling, Liebman, & Katz, 2007; Orr et al., 2003). However, only 8% of participants in the same study had found a job through a neighborhood tie, and individuals in high- and low-poverty neighborhoods did not differ in this ability. Another study found little evidence that movers experienced changes in social capital relative to non-movers (Pettit & McLanahan, 2001). Further, studies show little social mixing among higher- and lower-income people in redeveloped mixed communities, raising doubts about the assumptions underlying such programs (Brophy & Smith, 1997; Buron, Popkin, Levy, Harris, & Khadduri, 2002; Kleinhans, 2004).

On the whole, research has not provided consistent evidence on what the social networks of low-income people living in high-poverty neighborhoods look like, and whether relocation out of these neighborhoods leads to positive or negative changes in people's social worlds. This article helps fill this gap, presenting findings from one study that closely analyzed the changes that occurred in residents' networks after they were relocated out of a poverty-concentrated public housing project through the HOPE VI program. By looking at social networks at multiple points in time, the study was designed to capture the processes through which networks might change with a change in neighborhood.

Study overview and methods

This study utilized repeated detailed interviews with low-income women from Maverick Gardens, a public housing development in East Boston, Massachusetts (US) that was redeveloped through the HOPE VI program between 2002 and 2006. Interviews began in 2004, approximately one year after residents had been relocated, and continued through 2006. Interviews focused on the dynamics of women's social networks both prior to relocation as well as through the two years following relocation. Semi-structured interview guides were used to probe participants about: whom they talked to about important matters, whom they sought for advice, turned to for emotional and instrumental support; which social ties they used in their most recent job search; which ties they would use in a future job search; and whether and how access to different types of support and information had changed since relocation. Respondents were also asked whether others relied on them for such things, to what extent support was reciprocated, and whether the support they provided to others had changed since relocation.

The research was part of a dissertation study and the longitudinal Maverick Gardens HOPE VI Evaluation conducted by the Center for Urban and

Regional Policy at Northeastern University. As a member of the evaluation team, I was familiar with the community and the program, which helped gain entry and build trust with participants. Interviews were held in residents' homes and conducted by myself and a Spanish-speaking ethnographer. All interviews were tape-recorded, lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours, and participants were paid \$30 per interview for their time. Tapes and field notes were transcribed, systematically coded, and analyzed using QSR N6, a qualitative data analysis program (Richards, 2002). A combined deductive/inductive approach was used to code the data according to the research questions and hypotheses, in addition to allowing themes and concepts to emerge from the data through open coding. Inter-rater reliability was checked with a colleague who coded a random sample of transcripts using the developed coding scheme.

Three definitions of the main themes discussed in this paper are provided for those wishing to replicate coding. First, supportive ties are defined as those that provide an individual with emotional or instrumental support (e.g., food, money, child care). Draining ties are those that drain one's household of resources (e.g., frequent requests for food or money) or bring one down emotionally (e.g., constant complaining). Leveraging ties are defined as those that help people find jobs, get education, training, and other services and information that provide stepping-stones toward self-sufficiency (Briggs, 1998). This definition of leveraging ties is an improvement over categorizations of "bridging" (Putnam, 2000) or "weak" ties (Granovetter, 1973) because it includes any tie that provides assistance for upward mobility regardless of the strength of the tie or whether or not the tie crosses social boundaries. In other words, close ties and ties that are not cross-cutting are not overlooked or assumed irrelevant.

Sample

The study sample consisted of women who lived at Maverick Gardens for at least two years prior to the HOPE VI redevelopment. The study was limited to female residents due to the high percentage of female-headed households in public housing. The Maverick community was in a racially and poverty-concentrated census tract, with 50% of residents being non-white and 43% of families living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a, 2000b). In 2002, the Boston Housing Authority (BHA) received a HOPE VI grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to redevelop Maverick. In 2003, BHA started relocating residents to other public housing developments in Boston, to private market housing with Section 8 vouchers, or on-site to vacant units scheduled for demolition at a later date. The Section 8 program (renamed the Housing Choice Voucher Program in 1998) is a subsidized portable voucher program that enables families to rent in the private market. The original program name is used here since most residents still know the program as "Section 8."

To some extent, residents had choices on where they could move to. Those interested in relocating to another public housing community could provide the BHA with their first and second choice of housing developments. Those taking Section 8 vouchers had the flexibility to move to different communities (including out of state). In reality, however, persistent market barriers, including a lack of affordable units suitable for their families and a lack of landlords accepting Section 8, constrained their choices. Further, some public housing and Section 8 movers were so unfamiliar with communities outside of East Boston that they felt they were choosing blindly.

Prior to relocation, 375 households lived in the Maverick community. During the first phase of relocation, 116 households relocated. Of those relocations, 41% of residents moved on-site, 39% moved to other public housing, 18% moved with Section 8 vouchers, and 2% moved out of subsidized housing altogether. The study sample included 28 women who relocated during this first phase, and the sample was stratified to include women from the three main relocation groups: 11 on-site movers (39%), 9 Section 8 movers (32%), and 8 public housing movers (29%). Participants were recruited for the study via mail, phone, and/or in person visits. All 28 women were interviewed three times beginning one year after relocation and continuing through the end of their second year of relocation. Half of the women spoke primary languages other than English, and eight were interviewed in Spanish. Table 1 describes key sample characteristics.

HOPE VI relocation brought many participants to relatively lower-poverty census tracts. On average, 28% of residents in public housing movers' new neighborhoods, and 17% of those in Section 8 relocatees' new neighborhoods were poor (compared to a 43% poverty rate in Maverick; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). Some neighborhoods to which public housing movers relocated had lower poverty rates not because these developments were mixed-income, but because the census tracts sometimes included lower-poverty areas abutting the developments. Many sample households relocated to less segregated areas (public housing including 27% and Section 8

TABLE 1
Mean sample characteristics

	Mean	Range
Age	42	22-80
Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic	39.3%	
African-American	35.7%	
White	21.4%	
Asian	3.6%	
Number of children in household	2	0-5
High school graduate (or GED)	67.8%	
Employed*		43.5-60.9%
Number of years at Maverick prior to relocation	13	2-39

* Of the 23 non-elderly/non-disabled individuals.

neighborhoods including 50% non-white residents) when compared to Maverick (74% non-white) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b).

Findings

The social network and urban poverty literature offer several frameworks for analyzing social networks, including categorization schemes of strong vs. weak (Granovetter, 1973), bonding vs. bridging (Putnam, 2000), and supportive vs. bridging (Briggs, 1998). I quickly found that the women's social ties could not be fully captured by these existing dichotomous frameworks. Instead, three overarching themes emerged to capture the essence of most ties: supportive, draining, and leveraging. These themes are not mutually exclusive, as discussed later, but they are helpful in analyzing the women's social networks.

Supportive ties

Supportive social ties formed the foundation of most women's social networks. After spending an average of 13 years living at Maverick Gardens, most of the women in the study had an established network of close ties to neighbors, family members, and intimate partners where emotional and instrumental support were sought and provided. Relying on Maverick neighbors was a common strategy used to secure food and other resources such as loans and childcare in times of need. Michelle (pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identity) described how borrowing was reciprocated among close ties:

I have some friends here [at Maverick] that, if I need any food or something, I can call them. I can borrow a couple bucks if I needed. I mean, it's not *everybody* that's like that, it's some: the people you consider your friends, the people who are with you when you have *and* when you don't, that's what I'm talking about.... [Or] they might be out of food for the week, or if it's the end of the month. I'll take something out of the freezer and give it to them, I have no problem with that. 'Cause I might need their help someday.

As Michelle's comments suggest, unwritten expectations of reciprocity helped make these exchange networks function. These support networks are similar to what others have described in terms of kinship ties pooling resources to help each other cope (Stack, 1974; Vale, 2002).

In addition to emotional support and loans of food and money, child care was frequently obtained (and provided) through social networks. All 17 women with young children relied on their social ties for child care, some on a regular basis and others only in times of emergency. Overall, participants drew on (and gave to) their social networks according to their needs. For example, Sheila had one neighbor to whom she talked about personal troubles; her brother from whom she borrowed small amounts of money; and another friend from whom she sought advice.

Like neighbors, intimate partners formed a critical spoke in many women's support networks (14 had boyfriends and three had husbands). These relationships were often created and managed carefully with emotional and financial benefits and costs in mind. For instance, many women had their boyfriends living with them, but would not put them on their lease. This benefited the women in several ways: it translated into more household income (since the partner's income was not included in their rent calculation) and it provided the women greater freedom to end the relationships on their own terms. For many women, having a partner in the household meant access to things such as spare money for children's clothes, bus passes, televisions, washing machines, help paying utility bills, and time spent with their children. Stephanie described her reliance on her boyfriend's help.

I don't know how I lived before. I mean, now I have a cell [phone], we have a computer, we have food.... I just don't even know how we survived before.... But if I had to put him on the lease? It would be *very* different.

Not all of the women in the study were embedded in localized networks with neighbors: some had social lives outside the development while others kept to themselves. Jessica's network, for example, was comprised solely of her adult children and other close relatives. She had no close ties to neighbors at Maverick, despite having lived there for over 20 years. Residents like Jessica "literally inhabit the same physical space, but coexist in separate social worlds" from their neighbors (Jarrett, 1997, p. 284). Several women kept to themselves due to great suspicion and mistrust of neighbors, similar to the low-income men in Liebow's (1967) study.

Relocation and supportive ties. Relocation had the inevitable effect of changing the women's proximity to many of the people who had provided them with support. About half of the women (13) experienced negative changes in their networks due to moving further away from supportive ties. The other women in the study did not experience substantial changes in supportive ties either because their networks were not based in the Maverick community to begin with, they did not rely on others much for support prior to relocation, or they did not move very far from their ties. After relocating within Maverick, for example, Jessica experienced no changes in support since her network consisted entirely of family members who were still nearby. Those that did have localized support networks before relocation seemed caught off guard by the losses in social support after moving. Only two women moved closer to family, which had a positive impact on their access to support. Sometimes contact with former ties was difficult to maintain simply because participants and their friends were moving to different communities and changing contact information. Many families in the study also lost their phone service intermittently throughout the study due to non-payment of bills. In other cases the distance itself and the lack of face-to-face interaction contributed to the loss of ties over time. Gianna explained that the distance, inconvenience, and reputation of her new community factored into why people in her network no longer visited her:

When I moved here, I lost contact with all the people from Maverick. . . . For some people that I used to see over there, they think I moved so much further away. I don't know why. . . . My nieces and them, they used to get off at the train and just walk down. But nobody likes getting off [here] and walking up. Even the ones that drive, they feel like I am living in the dungeons.

One important way in which relocation negatively influenced women's social networks was the disruption of informal or "off the books" child care arrangements. Child care provided by Maverick neighbors was particularly helpful for women who could not afford traditional licensed day care and for those who worked shifts when traditional child care was unavailable. Lisa's experience illustrates how relocation can create new problems for working mothers when support systems are fragmented. At Maverick, she relied heavily on her neighbor for child care, which allowed her to work nights at the airport. Her neighbor coordinated dinner, homework, and bedtime routines for her children and checked on them again late at night to make sure they were safe in bed. Lisa was unable to find anyone in her new community – a public housing development on the other side of Boston – to provide this type of support. For Lisa, relocation led to a downward spiral, starting with the loss of her child care arrangements, which led to the loss of her job, which in turn increased her anxiety and stress at a time when she had fewer people to turn to for support. Only when her adult son moved back in with her and could be there at night for her younger children (one and a half years later) was Lisa able to go back to work.

A reduction in emotional support and increased feelings of isolation were common experiences shared by many women after moving. Nilda talked about her loss:

We supported each other. We also consulted each other on things that happened to us in Maverick. We helped each other a lot. Here, I don't have anybody else to talk about my happiness, and my sorrows. Right now, I don't have anybody to talk to . . . to tell my personal problems to.

While most of the women's narratives recorded the disadvantages associated with the loss of supportive ties, one woman pointed out an unexpected consequence of learning to emotionally cope better on her own. Overall, the general pattern of losing supportive ties after relocation fits with what other research has shown about the detrimental effects of relocation on people's social networks (e.g., Gans, 1962, and more recent HOPE VI studies, Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; Greenbaum, 2002; Popkin et al., 2004).

In addition to disrupting ties to supportive friends and neighbors, relocation also affected access to supportive services, such as food pantries, local shops, and other programs for children and families. One woman explained: "If one day I didn't have money for breakfast, one can go and have breakfast with the children and lunches in the housing office area [at Maverick]. Here is completely different." Another woman relied on the local "bodegas" (convenience stores) at Maverick to loan her food in times of need: "When I find myself tight with money. . . and I need bread, 'mis bodegas' help me out." An additional resource upon which several residents relied was the

Maverick Tenant's Organization, a resident-led group that informed residents of local activities and services. Ellen explained her frustration of feeling disconnected in her new housing development:

I've been here two years and I haven't heard of anything that's going on within this little community. I mean, nothing has been sent out to residents about anything that's going on or any of the programs they may have right here.

While many women experienced a substantial loss in supportive ties, two were successful in strategically using their Section 8 vouchers to relocate closer to their families, which improved their access to material and emotional support. Having her mother nearby prompted Nilda to take evening courses after work. Her mother now cares for the children before and after school, in addition to three nights per week, while Nilda attends GED and childcare education classes. Clearly, having a trusted and willing family member or friend nearby can be a leveraging resource for women who otherwise lack affordable childcare or care for non-traditional hours.

In addition to the effect relocation had on pre-existing social ties, I assessed women's experiences in developing supportive relations in their new communities. In general, building new ties during the two years following relocation was the exception rather than the rule for women in this study. During the first year of relocation, none of the women reported new supportive ties in their new neighborhoods. By the end of the study (two years after relocation) only five women had connected with one or two new neighbors in a healthy, supportive way. The longitudinal nature of the study was essential for capturing the process through which women negotiated new relationships in new places. For example, Bianca did not know or trust anyone in her new housing development at first, but a year and a half later she had become very friendly with one neighbor, with whom she visited almost daily and trusted enough to allow to watch her daughter. While Lisa had not made any close friendships in her new housing development, she learned to trust a woman downstairs to keep an eye on her children to exchange sleepovers.

Why did so few women form supportive ties in their new communities? A number of factors might answer this question. First, put simply, two years may not be long enough to develop such ties. Second, relocation was temporary for some residents. Although some relocatees did not want to return to Maverick (including most Section 8 movers), others were uncertain if and when they would be offered a new unit, and if so whether they would move back. These decisions depended on factors such as how well they and their children adjusted to their current neighborhood, school, etc., whether they would be offered a new unit, and whether the quality and management of the new community met their expectations. This uncertainty lasted about three years (until the redevelopment of Maverick was complete). Although none of the participants indicated that their expected length of residence in their neighborhood factored into their desire and/or ability to form new ties, it may well have affected how much they were willing to

invest in neighborly relations. Finally, the reception of neighbors is another factor that can influence a newcomer's prospects for developing local ties. For example, one woman in the study felt her new neighbors discriminated against her family based on their ethnicity, and this experience clearly undermined the development of supportive ties to neighbors.

Draining ties

While the supportive ties in women's networks are consistent with those documented by earlier studies (Stack, 1974; Vale, 2002), I discovered one group of social ties not well-defined in the literature. I call these "draining ties" and define them as the relationships to people that drain one's household of resources through frequent requests for assistance with food, money, or other assistance that is not reciprocated, as well as ties to people that bring one down emotionally with constant complaining or involvement in their problems.

Over a third of the women (11) in this study reported draining ties prior to relocation from Maverick. Some of these ties brought the women down emotionally, while others drained their households of already fragile resources. For example, Stephanie had an extremely draining network at Maverick, and she talked about how she ended up providing more support to neighbors than she received in return:

Well, especially, when you know it's true, you know. I feel embarrassed to say to you, "Hey, remember, I gave you such and such, and I need such and such myself." I don't know, it kind of put me in a bad situation over there in a way. Like it was nice because I knew people, and you could come and have coffee or whatever. But, it was real cheesy too because at times ... because I'm the type, if you come over, you know, automatically I'm going to ... put on a meal, and we'll eat and we'll talk, and the kids will play games, you know whatever, normal. The next thing I know, like they kept coming *all the time*. ... It was *Grand Central Station*, we used to call it! ... they *dog* you for everything. "Could you give me a ride? Could you this, could you that, could you this, could you that?" ... The favors become deeper and deeper and you don't know how to get out.

Negotiating draining ties was challenging and often an ongoing process for women. Several women carefully navigated relationships with Maverick neighbors in order to avoid emotional drama. "Getting too close" to neighbors was perceived as dangerous by some who felt their "business" would be exposed to a larger audience through gossip. Jessica learned early on the emotional toll neighborly relations could take and has employed an avoidance tactic ever since.

I stay to myself. Ever since I've lived here [Maverick] ... I don't get too chummy with people. Because when I first moved in [22 years ago], I did and the individuals was too ... they get too involved in your life. So I just stay to myself. I just find that some ... some of the people that live in the development, they just like to go in and find out your business. So I said no, I don't need that problem.

While some women talked about ending relationships with people who were too demanding, Shakira talked about cutting off ties to people who were not supportive of her efforts to “get straight.” She explained:

I just had a lot of people that ... I don't hang around because they may not be doing what I want to do in life. I don't really want to be around people ... why really hang around them if you are trying to make your life a little better than what it was or whatever?

The strong and sometimes negative pull social ties can have in discouraging or even preventing network members from getting ahead has been documented in other studies of low-income women (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003; Stack, 1974). In the current study, several women struggled to limit these negative influences and avoid potentially draining relationships.

While some ties were characteristically draining, others shifted between draining and supportive as the needs and resources of network members fluctuated. For example, Josie saw Karina as supportive when Karina was there to provide emotional support and money when Josie needed it. But when Karina lost her job or suffered from an episode of bipolar depression, Josie saw her as a big burden with her repeated requests for financial and emotional support. Josie knew that by helping Karina during her time of need she would be able to request such assistance in the future when she needed it. Still, because resources are tight and crisis situations unpredictable, a previously supportive tie can become draining and vice versa (see Belle, 1982, for a discussion of the costs and benefits of low-income women's relationships). This irregular flow of resources and stress highlights the complexities of social ties and the importance of studying the process of networks and social capital over time (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003).

Relocation and draining ties. Nine women in the study experienced positive changes in their networks by moving away from draining social ties. Participants talked about moving away from people that “brought them down.” Gianna, a Honduran woman who moved to another public housing development, profited from moving away from neighbors who borrowed money from her on a weekly basis. “Because now if somebody wants to borrow some money, I'll tell them to come and get it. But they can't get here. They want me to come and drop it off, but I'm like ‘no, come and get it.’” Moving from Maverick to another housing development also helped Stephanie realize that she was “in too deep with people at Maverick.” She gave too much, did not know how to say no, and in this respect saw moving to a different development as a new beginning:

I don't know, I kind of made a new start and I kind of thought, you know, I don't want any of that nonsense. So when I moved here, I kind of did that.... The neighbors [at Maverick] ... they were very nice and friendly, but they needed *a lot*.

Stephanie was cautious about letting new people into her life because of the costs associated with many of her relationships. Among the strategies

she used to avoid draining ties were: being unfriendly to new neighbours; not revealing her fluency in Spanish; and monitoring her children's new relationships since they could lead to her own burdensome ties with other parents. Although Stephanie was careful about forming new ties, it was not always easy. Halfway through the study, she mentioned that her neighbor downstairs "unfortunately introduced herself," and already she was providing more help to her neighbor than she received in return.

Clearly, it was challenging for some women to say no to neighbors in need when "you might need their help someday." Several participants indicated that, although some of their old Maverick neighbors were often a real bother, they could also be relied on in times of need for friendship and loans of food or money. Thus, while moving away from such ties had financial and emotional benefits, for some it also meant fewer potential ties to draw from.

While some people benefited from leaving draining neighbors and friends behind, others gained from moving away from draining household members. HOPE VI relocation prompted some larger families to split up since multi-generational families were given the option to form two separate households. Three participants in the study had large households before moving, and all reported benefits to splitting up their families, including reduced stress and improved health. For example, Sherry, a woman in her late seventies, reported improvements in emotional and physical well-being due to moving on her own. At Maverick, she had lived with her son, her daughter, and three grandchildren, and she complained about her children and grandchildren constantly depending on her for emotional support as well as material things. Although she never wanted to leave Maverick, relocation gave her the opportunity to get out and live on her own, and it prompted her adult children to move out and become more independent. Sherry reported that her asthma and blood pressure improved, both of which she attributed to the reduction in stress from moving away from her dependent family members.

In contrast to those who moved away from draining ties, one participant found she moved closer to draining ties. Although she did not want to move back to the neighborhood where she grew up, Vanessa did so because this was the only area where she found a suitable unit with a landlord willing to accept Section 8. She quickly regretted the move, and throughout the study complained how her old friends and family increased the "drama" and problems in her life:

When I first got Section 8, I wanted to move further out. Like, I really didn't want to come back to this area, because I was raised here. I really didn't want my kids over this way. Me, personally, I do better when I have distances with everybody. I think, because then you don't have people coming to your door, trying to come over, you know, you got to drive a distance to get to me like in East Boston. And here they just ... come up here.... Moving to this side, like I says, I wasn't gonna do it.... It's rough.

Leveraging ties

Much of the urban poverty literature suggests that living in a high-poverty community severely limits one's access to social leverage – opportunities and information necessary for upward mobility (Briggs, 1998; Wilson, 1987). Living in concentrated neighborhoods means that a resident is most likely to bump into people similarly situated at the bottom of the economic ladder. Having contact with well-educated and steadily employed people is thought to produce benefits, either indirectly through role modelling, or directly through job networks. Thus, I was interested in whether the women in this study were cut off from such ties while living at Maverick, whether relocation improved their access to such ties, and whether leveraging opportunities developed through such ties.

This third group of relationships, leveraging ties, are defined as those individuals that help people find jobs, get education, training, and other services and information that provide stepping-stones toward self-sufficiency (Briggs, 1998). I use the term “leveraging” rather than “bridging” or “weak,” which have also been used to describe ties that help people get ahead, because “bridging” is often limited to ties that cross class, race, or other social boundaries, and “weak” refers to those with whom we know informally and see infrequently. Thus, the women in this study had ties that provided leverage but these ties were sometimes neither weak nor bridging. My goal was to capture *any* type of tie that might provide assistance for upward mobility and not make assumptions about the role of weak or bridging ties.

The women in this study did have ties to people who helped them find jobs and access opportunities to get ahead even while living at Maverick Gardens, a poverty-concentrated community. While their leveraging ties included both strong and weaker ties, several trends emerged: they most often received job information through close, more intimate social ties; and learned about other opportunities, including education and training, through weaker, more distant ties. The findings suggest that the women were not entirely isolated from constructive social ties since they had people in their networks that were employed and had access to jobs and other opportunities. However, the jobs to which the women had access were typically low-wage positions that lacked benefits. Of the women who were working at some point during the study (10–14 women), most held entry-level jobs in the service industry (e.g., food service, hospitality, healthcare) – jobs that lacked stability and career ladders. And all but one found their jobs through close ties to people who were in entry-level positions like themselves. Job searches usually entailed asking friends, relatives, neighbors, and sometimes acquaintances about job openings at their workplaces. A typical example was Jennifer, whose brother-in-law informed her of a job in a suburban factory, put in a good word for her, and provided her daily transportation to work.

While most women learned about their jobs through a close contact who was similarly positioned, most had at least one tie to someone who was steadily employed in a higher-level position (e.g., at a hospital or college), and many tried using these ties in job searches. Yet only one woman found

her job through such a contact, suggesting that weak ties were not usually reliable for linking the low-income women to jobs. The findings also indicate that having employed or well-connected ties does not necessarily translate into more successful job networks, a finding consistent to that of Smith (2005), who found that “mobilization” of job contacts was more of a problem among low-income African-Americans than access. The findings are also similar to those of Kleit (2001) and Elliott (1999), both of whom found that low-income people most often used close, rather than weak, ties in their job searches.

One important and often overlooked factor that impeded women’s job searches and their ability to obtain better jobs was their weak labor force attachment and low levels of education and training. For example, nine of the women (32%) lacked a high school diploma or equivalent, the most basic requirement for even many entry-level jobs. Other factors that led to patchy work histories included a lack of reliable and affordable childcare, transportation, health problems, and low self-esteem.

While weak ties did not play a primary role in connecting the women to employment opportunities, they did provide access to other important resources, including education and training opportunities, housing, and services. Weak ties brought a variety of benefits to the women by linking them, for example, to a homeownership program for low-income people, an early childhood education program, and a tutoring program for children. These opportunities came through their weaker, rather than close, ties, such as someone at their workplace, the school department, or a social service agency. Thus, the findings suggest that low-income people can access important leveraging information through both close *and* distant ties.

Relocation and leveraging ties. It was expected that relocation out of Maverick might put the women in this study in a better position to diversify their social networks and tap into better job networks. However, even those who relocated to lower-poverty neighborhoods did not have access to more leveraging ties or better job networks, at least in the two years following relocation. Similar to the public housing movers in Kleit’s (2001) study, the women continued to use their close contacts for job leads rather than their new neighbors. Further, for the many participants who lost contact with their close, supportive ties – the people they also relied on for job information – relocation may result in fewer job contacts.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the social networks of low-income women from Maverick Gardens, a poverty-concentrated public housing development, and assess the changes that occurred in their networks after relocation. On the whole, the findings on women’s established support systems prior to relocation are consistent with other studies which have found that low-income women in poor communities often rely on exchange

networks in order to cope (Belle, 1983; Edin & Lein, 1997; Stack, 1974). Not surprisingly, for the women in the current study, who were enmeshed in such networks prior to moving, relocation resulted in less instrumental and emotional support (which in turn had a detrimental effect on some women's economic stability and mental health; see Curley, 2006). These findings concur with other recent studies that HOPE VI relocation often breaks up strong social networks, which can have a negative impact on families (Clampet-Lundquist, 2004; Greenbaum, 2002; Popkin et al., 2004). The majority of women in this study made no new ties in their neighborhoods in the two years following relocation, raising concerns about their ability to access adequate support.

While many women had well-functioning support networks prior to relocation, some had ties to people that were inherently "draining," in that they repeatedly drew resources and support without reciprocating. These draining ties included neighbors who constantly knocked on their doors in need of food or money as well as household members (e.g., adult children) who were too dependent. With the exception of a few studies that have revealed that social networks can sometimes result in an overload of responsibility and stress (Belle, 1982; Cohler & Lieberman, 1980; Durden, Hill, & Angel, 2007) or constrain individual mobility due to strong group obligations (Portes & Landolt, 1996; Stack, 1974), draining ties and the process through which ties may become draining is not well-developed in the literature. Thus, a key contribution of this research is the addition of "draining" as an important construct to consider when investigating the social networks of the urban poor. Including an assessment of social ties that come with a "cost" and how and when these relationships become burdensome is an important step in overcoming the inadequacies in existing analytical frameworks. The absence of such a construct in popular frameworks used for analyzing networks, such as weak vs. strong, support vs. leverage, or bridging vs. bonding, limits our understanding of low-income women's social worlds. Interestingly, relocation provided the opportunity for some women to sever their draining ties, enabling them to conserve more resources and mental energy for their own households, which could improve their long-term prospects for upward mobility. Future longitudinal studies are needed to further explore this pattern and assess whether and under what conditions these effects might occur.

In addition to supportive and draining ties, leveraging social ties also played an important role in women's networks. Since a combination of strong and distant ties proved useful for accessing opportunities, this study suggests that investigating all "leveraging" ties may provide a more complete picture of how low-income people get ahead, rather than fixating on "weak" or "bridging" ties as those that offer the most potential. Close, supportive ties most often connected women with job opportunities, while more distant ties connected them with education, training, and other services. Interestingly, none of their leveraging ties were formed in their new communities; they had all been part of their network when they were living in Maverick. Even the women who relocated to lower-poverty areas were no more

successful in forming new leveraging ties, nor did they gain any tangible economic benefits from their increased proximity to higher-income people. Several factors may help explain why no new leveraging ties were built, including that new ties, and leveraging ties in particular, may take longer than two years to develop. It may also be that people do not easily encounter opportunities to form new leveraging ties (e.g., due to neighborhood spatial arrangements or low collective efficacy; see Curley, 2008) or that they do not take advantage of the opportunities when they arise (e.g., due to pride, shame, or stigma; see Blokland and Noordhoff 2008). Further, women's inability to establish supportive ties may inhibit their ability to form leveraging ties as well. After similarly finding that few public housing relocatees found their jobs through neighbors, Briggs, Cove, Duarte and Turner (2007) concluded that the:

lack of neighbor-sourced job referrals in low poverty areas ... reflected both a wariness about *forming* meaningful ties to neighbors, a lack of *structural* opportunities to form more ties, and a lack of willingness to *activate* ties to neighbors for help. (p. 17)

Overall, these findings challenge the notion that relocation to lower-poverty areas reduces social isolation and increases the leveraging social capital of poor people. A key finding from this research – that the poor do not necessarily benefit from increased access to higher-income people – contradicts what is often suggested in the literature. Thus, the findings here suggest we may need to radically re-think our expectations of housing mobility and poverty-deconcentration programs.

A key question raised by this research is whether we should continue to assume that more “weak” or “bridging” ties to higher-income people represent a ticket to upward mobility. Many of the women in this study *had* ties to employed, middle-class people in their networks *prior* to relocation, but these ties were not helpful for finding jobs. While higher-income people may have access to better job opportunities, they do not necessarily offer this information, perhaps because the jobs they have access to do not match the skills of lower-income people, or because they simply feel no obligation to do so. Ties through which information, such as job leads, are given are unique in that “donors” of such social capital “are requested to make these assets available without any immediate return” (Portes, 1998, p. 3). Other factors that can influence the activation of a job contact include reputation, motivation, and community context (Smith, 2005). As Smith (2003) points out, “one’s connections to well-placed others does not guarantee resources. What promotes the transmission of valued resources are obligations of exchange, shared expectations, and mutual trust ...” (p. 1033). It is likely that women obtained their jobs through their close, supportive ties more often because these were the people who felt an obligation to help and because they had access to jobs that matched their qualifications.

Another point made clear from this research is that social leverage cannot be disconnected from social support. Without their ties to people who provided emotional support, childcare, transportation, and food and money

loans, women were not able to maintain steady employment or take other steps toward self-sufficiency. As Dominguez and Watkins found in their study of low-income women's social networks, supportive and leveraging ties "can work together in tandem or in tension to allow (or preclude) day-to-day survival and mobility" (2003, p. 111).

In this study I used a relatively small sample to present and develop theoretical frameworks, an effective approach used in other qualitative studies (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003; Stack, 1974). Since this research was based on a small sample of women relocated from one community in the US, caution should be used in generalizing the findings to the larger population (e.g., to all HOPE VI relocatees or to all low-income women). Other limitations of the study include the fact that relocation was not randomized and relocation for some was temporary, making it challenging to isolate the effects of relocation and neighborhood. Despite these limitations, this study offers several directions for future research, including the examination of low-income movers' social networks over a longer period. Large scale longitudinal studies are needed to further explore the patterns exposed in this research and assess whether these patterns hold for other populations (e.g., men) and how networks develop and change over a longer period of time. For example, do relocatees eventually form supportive ties with new neighbors, and if so, how long does this typically take? Do those who live in lower-poverty areas eventually connect with their higher-income neighbors, and if so, to what extent do these new ties generate better job leads or other opportunities? Do those who remain in or move to other high-poverty areas become burdened with new draining ties over time? In essence, do different types of relocation – public housing, vouchers, or new mixed-income housing – shape social networks differently?

The longitudinal design of the present study is an improvement over previous research that looked at social networks at one point in time. In order to fully understand the implications of one's social network, we need to explore networks at multiple points in time, assess incoming and outgoing flows of resources and stress, and the dynamic ways in which social ties work to promote or inhibit upward mobility. Future research might also explore whether the availability of neighborhood institutions and local services affects the likelihood of low-income residents having draining ties and the extent to which they rely on other network members for support.

Although this is a small-scale study, several policy implications may be in store if the findings are repeated in other studies. For example, if splitting up multi-generational households benefits many families, relocation programs might expand this option. In addition, housing mobility programs should address issues that constrain relocation choices, particularly those associated with using vouchers. Further, if draining ties are so prevalent in high-poverty communities, and eliminating these ties is so beneficial, then this may be one reason (among others) that families may not relocate to other public housing projects where they will only live among other very "needy" families. Relocation counseling should help residents assess the impact moving might have on their social networks, including the costs and

benefits to moving away from ties that provide and draw different resources. And the findings on draining ties also indicate that more services are needed, wherever low-income people live, so that people do not get drained or drain others. In addition, the loss of supportive ties and the fact that few new ties were built in the years shortly after relocation further suggest a role for expanded assistance in connecting relocatees to social institutions and other supports in their new communities.

In conclusion, social ties that offer support and leverage, as well as those that drain, all have implications for people's access to resources and their ability to make ends meet and get ahead. While their pre-existing (pre-relocation) social networks were limited in terms of the existence of draining ties, the women's networks were valuable for providing social support and connecting them to jobs and other opportunities. The positive change some women experienced in their social networks due to relocation was the elimination of draining ties, not the addition of leveraging ties as theories and policies expect. The findings suggest that housing mobility programs that expect low-income movers to improve their prospects for self-sufficiency by diversifying their social networks do not take into account the complexities of poverty and barriers to employment, the formation of social ties, and the transmission of social capital.

REFERENCES

- Belle, D. (1982). The stress of caring: Women providers as providers of social support. In A. S. B. L. Goldberg (Ed.), *Handbook of stress* (pp. 496–505). New York: The Free Press.
- Belle, D. (1983). The impact of poverty on social networks and support. *Marriage and Family Review*, 5, 89–103.
- Blokland, T., & Noordhoff, F. (2008). The weakness of weak ties: Social capital to get ahead among the urban poor in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. In T. Blokland & M. Savage (Eds.), *Networked urbanism: Social capital in the city* (pp. 105–125). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Briggs, X. D. S. (1998). Brown kids in white suburbs: Housing mobility and the many faces of social capital. *Housing Policy Debate*, 9(1), 177–221.
- Briggs, X. D. S., Cove, E., Duarte, C., & Turner, M. A. (2007). *How does leaving high poverty neighborhoods affect the employment prospects of low-income mothers and youth? Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment*. Unpublished Working paper.
- Brophy, P., & Smith, R. (1997). Mixed-income housing: Factors for success. *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, 3(2), 3–31.
- Buron, L., Popkin, S. J., Levy, D., Harris, L. E., & Khadduri, J. (2002). *The HOPE VI resident tracking study*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Clampet-Lundquist, S. (2004). HOPE VI relocation: Moving to new neighborhoods and building new ties. *Housing Policy Debate*, 15(2), 415–447.
- Cohler, B. J., & Lieberman, M. A. (1980). Social relations and mental health among three European ethnic groups. *Research on Aging*, 2(4), 445–496.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human-capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95–S120.
- Curley, A. M. (2006). *Hope and housing: The effects of relocation on movers' economic stability, social networks, and health*. Unpublished dissertation, Boston University, Boston.
- Curley, A. M. (2008). A new place, a new network? Social capital effects of residential relocation for poor women. In T. Blokland & M. Savage (Eds.), *Networked urbanism*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Dominguez, S., & Watkins, C. (2003). Creating networks for survival and mobility: Social capital among African-American and Latin-American low-income mothers. *Social Problems*, 50(1), 111-135.
- Durden, E. D., Hill, T. D., & Angel, R. J. (2007). Social demands, social supports, and psychological distress among low-income women. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 24(3), 343-361.
- Edin, K., & Lein, L. (1997). *Making Ends Meet*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Elliott, J. R. (1999). Social isolation and labor market insulation: Network and neighborhood effects on less-educated urban workers. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 40(2), 199-216.
- Gans, H. (1962). *Urban villagers: Group and class in the life of Italian-Americans*. New York: Free Press.
- Goetz, E. (2003). *Clearing the way: Deconcentrating the poor in urban America*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.
- Granovetter, M. (1973). Strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, 78(6), 1360-1380.
- Granovetter, M. (1974). *Getting a job: A study of contacts and careers*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Greenbaum, S. (2002). Social capital and deconcentration: Theoretical and policy paradoxes of the HOPE VI program. *North American Dialogue* 5(1), 9-13.
- Jarrett, R. L. (1997). African American family and parenting strategies in impoverished neighborhoods. *Qualitative Sociology*, 20(2), 275-288.
- Kleinhans, R. (2004). Social implications of housing diversification in urban renewal: A review of recent literature. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, 19, 367-390.
- Kleit, R. G. (2001). The role of neighborhood social networks in scattered-site public housing residents' search for jobs. *Housing Policy Debate*, 12(3), 541-573.
- Kling, J., Liebman, J., & Katz, L. (2007). Experimental analysis of neighborhood effects. *Econometrica*, 75(1), 83-119.
- Liebow, E. (1967). *Tally's corner: A study of negro streetcorner men*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Orr, L., Feins, J., Jacob, R., Beecroft, E., Sanbonmatsu, L., Katz, L., et al. (2003). *Moving to opportunity interim impacts evaluation*. Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).
- Pettit, B., & McLanahan, S. (2001). Social dimensions of moving to opportunity. *Poverty Research News*, 5(1), 1-10.
- Popkin, S. J., Levy, D. K., Harris, L. E., Comey, J., Cunningham, M. K., & Buron, L. F. (2004). The HOPE VI program: What about the residents? *Housing Policy Debate*, 15(2), 385-414.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1-24.
- Portes, A., & Landolt, P. (1996). The downside of social capital. *American Prospect*, 26, 18-21, 94.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rainwater, L. (1970). The problem of lower class culture. *Journal of Social Issues*, 26(2), 133-148.
- Reingold, D. A., Van Ryzin, G. G., & Ronda, M. (2001). Does urban public housing diminish the social capital and labor force activity of its tenants? *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 20(3), 485-504.
- Richards, L. (2002). *Using N6 in Qualitative Research*. Victoria: QSR International Pty Ltd.
- Saegert, S., & Winkel, G. (1998). Social capital and the revitalization of New York city's distressed inner-city housing. *Housing Policy Debate*, 9(1), 17-60.
- Small, M. L. (2004). *Villa Victoria: The transformation of social capital in a Boston barrio*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, S. (1995, August). *Poverty concentration and social networks: Implications for joblessness*. Paper presented at the American Sociological Association, Washington, DC.
- Smith, S. (2003). Exploring the efficacy of African-Americans job referral networks: A study of the obligations of exchange around job information and influence. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 26(6), 1029-1045.
- Smith, S. (2005). Don't put my name on it: Social capital activation and job-finding assistance among the black urban poor. *American Journal of Sociology*, 111(1), 1-57.

- Stack, C. (1974). *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a black community*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Tigges, L. M., Browne, I., & Green, G. P. (1998). Social isolation of the urban poor: Race, class and neighborhood effects on social resources. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 39(1), 53–77.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2000a). *Census 2000 Summary File 4 (SF 4) – Sample Data*. Retrieved July 5, 2009, from <http://factfinder.census.gov>
- U.S. Census Bureau (2000b). *Census 2000 Summary File 1 (SF 1) 100-Percent Data*. Retrieved July 5, 2009, from <http://factfinder.census.gov>
- Vale, L. J. (2002). *Reclaiming public housing*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Wacquant, L., & Wilson, W. J. (1989). The costs of racial and class exclusion in the inner city. *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science*, 501, 8–25.
- Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When work disappears: The world of the new urban poor*. New York: Random House.