

# Creating Networks for Survival and Mobility: Social Capital Among African-American and Latin-American Low-Income Mothers

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*In this article, we examine the social networks of low-income mothers, using a conceptual framework that differentiates social networks that offer support from those that yield leverage. This ethnographic analysis pays particular attention to how respondents generate social capital to obtain resources for survival and social mobility. Respondents identified at least three issues beyond resource constraints that work alone or in combination to positively or negatively influence their use of family as sources of social support: physical proximity, reciprocity, and family tensions. We also explore the conditions under which respondents generate social support through friendships and non-profit institutions. We find that social capital that improves opportunities for upward mobility can be obtained from relationships that provide advice, contacts, and encouragement to get ahead. We also find that social support and social leverage networks can work in tandem or in tension to allow (or preclude) day-to-day survival and mobility. Social support networks can inhibit social mobility by enforcing time-consuming and professionally limiting expectations on women. The size and heterogeneity of the network becomes important in such instances.*

Low-income mothers residing in the inner city often have social networks that are localized, insular, and sometimes draining (Fischer 1982; Menjívar 2000; Oliver 1988; Stack 1974; Wellman and Potter 1999; Wilson 1987, 1996). Since family and friends who make up these social networks are also likely to be disadvantaged, there is limited opportunity for the kinds of social interaction that could potentially lead to upward social mobility. Maria Fernández-Kelly (1995) observes in her analysis of adolescent childbearing that dense and truncated social support networks reduce access to information and options available in the outside world while simultaneously supporting alternative cultural styles that may make access to

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mainstream employment more difficult. Her work also raises questions about the favorability of densely knit networks associated with low-income families, asking whether these relationships are even helpful to women in their efforts to create opportunities and utilize resource streams for daily survival.

However, the notion that low-income women are socially isolated with few connections to resources that can aid in survival and mobility may be too sweeping. Both Mary Pattillo-McCoy (1999) and John Jackson (2001) highlight the meaningful cross-class interactions that take place among African-Americans through familial ties, church affiliation, and neighborhoods. These interactional ties can act as bridges between high poverty and middle class areas, as well as between some low-income immigrant communities. Roger Waldinger and Claudia Der-Martirosian (2001:230) explain that some clusters, or network-based economic concentrations "confine immigrants to the very worst segments of the labor market, others provide access to opportunities of a far more favorable nature, and still others offer intermediate options." In sum, social networks differ in terms of the resources they yield and their constraint or facilitation of individual's opportunities.

Using a conceptual framework that differentiates social networks that offer support from those that yield leverage (Briggs 1998), this article examines the social networks of low-income mothers. We pay particular attention to how these women generate social capital to obtain resources for survival and social mobility. Three questions drive the research. How can we characterize the social *support* networks of Latin-American<sup>1</sup> and African-American low-income mothers? How can we characterize their social *leverage* networks? What are the implications of their use of social capital for their survival and mobility in an environment of scarcity? We explore these questions using data gathered over two years of ethnographic interviews with African-American and Latin-American women living in economically segregated, low-income neighborhoods in Boston.

## The Role of Social Capital in Survival and Mobility

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) expanded the concept of "capital," which is generally related only to economics, to include social, cultural, and symbolic resources.<sup>2</sup> Since then, "social capital" has gained popularity as an analytic term used to explain the stratification process at individual and aggregate levels. At the aggregate level, social capital has been used to analyze neighborhood social organization (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997) as well as civic and economic regional performance (Putnam 1993, 2000). In this article, we examine the use of social capital at the individual level, focusing directly on how social ties linked to networks and/or institutions act as sources of social support and status attainment (Briggs 1998). As Xavier de Souza Briggs (2002:34) points out, "differential coping or mobility chances are explained directly by access to social connections, net of education, income, and other factors." This level of social capital closely fits Alejandro Portes' definition as the "ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (1998:3).

At the individual level, Briggs (1998) conceptualizes two types of social capital residing in relational networks: social support and social leverage. We use this framework to explore the resource attainment strategies of African-American and Latin-American mothers. Ties that offer *social support* help individuals to "get by" or cope with the demands of everyday life and

1. Throughout this article, the term "Latin-American" refers to people of Latin American origin and descent, including Hispanics and/or Latinos.

2. Bourdieu (1986:248) defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition." For early work on social capital, see Loury (1977).

other stresses. Social support is most often associated with “strong” ties, which tend to be made of kin, neighbors, and intimate friends. These ties generally provide individuals with emotional and expressive support as well as certain forms of instrumental help like rides, small loans, or a place to stay in case of emergency (Briggs 1998). They can also help to ensure that basic needs are met, assist in child rearing, and provide tools for improving employment situations.

Small, homogeneous networks can help to conserve existing resources and provide social support, particularly in small, insular communities (Stack 1974; Wellman and Potter 1999). Dense networks can play a positive role, as they often allow individuals to access opportunities in tightly knit communities with connections to labor markets (Newman 1999; Waters 1994). Indeed, in tightly knit communities, the “strength of strong ties” can be manifested in the development of an “enforceable trust” among members and in-group oriented behavior in the form of “bounded solidarity” (Lin, Ensel, and Vaughn 1981; Portes 1995). While bounded solidarity forms in relation to the existence of—and the possibility of confrontation with—the outside world, enforceable trust is based on the internal sanctioning capacity of the community (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993). Although trust and support are important factors in day-to-day efforts to survive, they are also forms of social control (Portes 1998) that sometimes undermine social and economic mobility by acting as leveling pressures and by placing restrictions on individual freedom.

Networks composed of ties that offer *social leverage* help individuals to “get ahead” or change their opportunity structure. Ties that offer leverage can promote upward mobility by providing access to education, training, and employment. Large, dispersed, and heterogeneous (interclass) social networks increase the opportunity for advancement (Burt 1987; Wellman and Gulia 1999). Interclass networks stand in contrast to dense, truncated networks that often produce redundant ties, which constrain “dispersion [of information] and the search for new opportunities” (Waldinger and Der-Martirosian 2001:244). For example, Cecilia Menjivar (2000) found in her investigation of Salvadoran immigrants in San Francisco that in a context of employment scarcity, many of the Salvadoran men joined networks that facilitated the exchange of information and resources. However, because of the socioeconomic homogeneity of their networks, the same kinds of information and resources circulated, limiting their opportunities for advancement.

The literature on social networks suggests that leverage-producing ties—which typically exert influence outside one’s immediate family and circle of friends—are often “weak” ties (Boissevain 1974; Campbell, Marsden, and Hurlbert 1986; Granovetter 1973). But according to Briggs (2002), these ties are not necessarily weak. Indeed, Briggs contends that social leverage in the form of increased access to diverse resources comes from “bridges” that are weak or strong ties that cut across race, ethnicity, and/or social class (also see Granovetter 1995). According to Briggs (2002), three conditions shape the development of bridges: opportunity for contact, active pursuit according to shared traits or inbreeding, and pressure of association from one’s own group or the out-group. Economic and racial segregation limits the opportunity for contact, thereby strengthening group boundaries and cross-group differences and increasing preferences for inbreeding. These factors cut access to outside contacts and potential bridges.

In addition to bridges, there are other factors to be considered when studying the social networks of low-income single mothers. First, the ability to maintain a balanced level of reciprocity with network ties is critical within a context of economic scarcity (Menjivar 2000). Margaret Nelson’s (2000) work on low-income single mothers suggests a logic of reciprocity that shifts with the perceived situation of the giver. In relationships with others in similar life circumstances and situations of need, the women hold to relatively strict norms of return. This system of returning goods and services within a relatively short time is heavily based on trust and an assurance that those who live in similar circumstances will understand, and be sympathetic about, daily needs. However, there are also strong norms against repeatedly taking

more than one can give, insensitivity to the degree or frequency with which a family can assist, and taking advantage of temporary crisis for personal gain. Maintaining balanced reciprocal relationships is even more important in low-income single parent households where there are no other adults present to contribute childcare and additional basic needs. Researchers observe that limited resources can leave expectations for reciprocity unmet (Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg 1993). Unmet reciprocity can increase tension and potentially lead to the dissolution of relationships (Belle 1982; Menjívar 1997, 2000; Roschelle 1997).

The assignment of roles according to gender within households is a second factor that can affect women's ability to cultivate and capitalize on opportunities for network building. Many researchers find that young women from low-income families are recruited early in their lives to perform extensive household work and childcare for their families. This heavy workload discourages the women from concentrating on education or pursuing social relations outside the home (Dietrich 1998; Dodson 1998). Carol Stack and Linda Burton (1993) define the dynamics behind the recruitment as *kin-scription*—power plays between family members to enlist individuals into a specific household division of labor, even when those duties derail or inhibit the personal goals and ambitions of these individuals.

Third, as the primary responsibility for childcare is often assigned to mothers, women who cannot access this resource through the marketplace must rely heavily on their social support networks. At best, using social support networks for such an important function can strengthen ties and build relationships that support women's day-to-day survival and socio-economic pursuits. At worst, childcare arrangements with informal providers can leave mothers worried about safety, consistency, and their children's intellectual stimulation. These important concerns can block them from focusing on the development of social leverage networks necessary for mobility.

An appropriate network balance of social support and social leverage may determine whether Latin-American and African-American mothers are struggling to survive or actively pursuing goals to escape poverty. Their success depends on the nature and structure of their social networks. The networks in which these women are embedded could potentially shape their experience of poverty and achievement of mobility. Whom they know and how they relate to other people may influence their personal trajectories and opportunities. Thus, describing the dynamics of women's social networks will provide valuable insight into their ability to pool resources to make ends meet and get ahead in life.

## **Background and Methods**

### ***The Study***

The ethnographic data for this analysis are derived from the *Welfare Reform, Children, and Families Three-City Study*. The Three-City Study examines issues such as work, welfare, family, money, intimate relationships, and social networks in the lives of low-income families living in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio through longitudinal surveys, embedded developmental studies, and comparative ethnographic studies. The purpose of the ethnographic component of the study is to conduct fine-grained assessments of how, over time, welfare reform policies influence the day-to-day lives of low-income African-American, Latin-American, and non-Hispanic white families.

As Boston-based ethnographers, we conducted participant observation and longitudinal ethnographic interviews during 2000 and 2001 with five African-American and five Latin-American women. The experiences of these women serve as the basis for the current analysis. All of the participants are low-income mothers with young children living in concentrated areas of poverty in the Boston area. We recruited participants through neighborhood social

service organizations and random encounters in public areas. We conducted interviews monthly, usually at the home of the respondent or at a location of her preference. During the interviews, we followed interview guides and adhered to a similar format, adapting to special circumstances and the flow of information. Each tape-recorded interview lasted approximately two hours. We conducted interviews in the language respondents reported being most comfortable speaking—English, Spanish, or Spanglish—and then translated them to English. We also accompanied the women in their daily activities such as interacting with service agencies and other bureaucracies and attending family celebrations.

Our methodology has three major strengths. First, because data were collected as part of a longitudinal study, we look at the experiences of our respondents not as snapshots in time but as processes through which the respondents develop and utilize relationships for the acquisition of resources. We are able to see how participants alter their social networks as their circumstances change. Second, ethnographic data, collected through participant-observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews, is multi-dimensional in that it reveals behavioral patterns over time and allows us to capture not only what respondents say but also what they do. Third, by including Latin-American mothers among our respondents, we can examine how a growing but understudied population of women living in inner city communities experiences poverty. (The population of Latin-Americans in the city of Boston rose from 6.4 percent in 1980 to 14.4 percent in 2000 [Boston Redevelopment Authority 2001]). Exploring issues concerning language and immigrant integration among this group of women provides us with reason to believe that much of what we know about poverty in the United States may not apply to this growing population.

We should also note some methodological caveats and limitations. Data are based on the experiences of ten women in one U.S. city. Because respondents were not randomly selected and are all minority women, they are not representative of the city's overall low-income population. Moreover, because the group of respondents is small, our goal is to develop an in-depth understanding of the strategies these women use to survive and move ahead, and in so doing, to test the applicability of established theories to this specific sample and situation. Further, any cross-group comparisons, implicit or explicit, can only be tentative.

Nevertheless, the women we studied did share the demographic characteristics of a substantial part of the Boston low-income community in terms of age, race, and education, suggesting that they are not extreme cases. Further, there have been several influential, longitudinal qualitative studies that utilize a small number of respondents to draw out important sociological lessons (Dietrich 1998; Liebow 1967; MacLeod 1995). Their methodological approach highlights the experiences of a relatively small number of individuals in order to develop, present, and expand theoretical frameworks. The present study uses a similar rationale to address current debates in poverty research, social capital theory, network theory, and immigrant incorporation debates. Our goal is to add to and refine existing theories by looking at the ways in which low-income Latin-American and African-American women create and manage social relationships to access resources for survival and mobility (Burawoy 1991).

### *The Respondents*

The women we studied are members of the two largest minority populations in the United States and share many of the economic and social characteristics of the poorest segments of these groups. While 7.5 percent of all European-Americans live in poverty, the percentage increases to 22.1 percent for African-Americans and 21.2 for Latin-Americans (Dalaker 2000). In Boston over 32 percent of African-American and 48 percent of Latin-American female-headed families with children under the age of 18 live in poverty, compared to 21 percent of European-American families (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). All respondents in this study are women living in poverty, ranging in age from 19 to 40 years (28 is the

mean age).<sup>3</sup> Three of our Latin-American respondents are second generation immigrants.<sup>4</sup> Marta, a 21-year-old, and Paula, who is 25, were both born in Boston to Puerto Rican parents.<sup>5</sup> Camila is a 19-year-old Dominican who arrived in Boston in 1986, at the age of four. The two remaining mothers are first generation immigrants; Josefa, a 36-year-old woman from Honduras who has been in Boston since 1990, and Marcela, a 25-year-old Puerto Rican who traveled back and forth from the island several times before settling in Boston in 1997. Respondents have between one and three children, with an average of two. Out of the five women, only Josefa has been married. She currently lives with her husband and their three children. The other four respondents live with their children and their mothers. All of the women except for Paula have high school diplomas and three pursued post-secondary education. However, none has completed the requirements for a degree, although Camila is attending a community college. All of the respondents were working at the time of interviews, making between \$8.50 and \$12.00 per hour.

Our African-American sample includes two mothers, Shelly and Dara, who are 23 years of age. The three remaining mothers—Karen, Beverly, and Tasha—are 35, 36, and 40 years old, respectively. The respondents have between one and six children, with an average of 2.6. None of the five African-American women has ever been married. Four respondents currently live only with their children. Dara lives with her child, mother, and younger sister. All five of the African-American women have a high school diploma or GED. In years prior to participation in the study, Karen attended community college and Shelly attended a four-year institution. However, neither completed the requirements for a degree. All of the respondents had worked in the past and four were working at the time of interviews. Shelly and Dara make \$10.00 and \$10.50 per hour respectively, while Beverly and Tasha are working in jobs paying less than \$6.50 per hour. Beverly and Tasha are the women with the largest numbers of children—four and six—and the greatest financial need.

To varying degrees, all of the women use federal and state aid to low-income families as part of their respective survival strategies.<sup>6</sup> Of the five African-American women, Shelly had been on public assistance for 18 consecutive months within the last five years, while Beverly was the only respondent receiving cash benefits at the time of the study. As she worked during the study, her benefits fluctuated and eventually ended. Tasha and Karen receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits as their main sources of income, and two of Tasha's sons and Karen's only child receive Temporary Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC) benefits as part of child-only grants.<sup>7</sup> Dara has an informal arrangement with her son's father for regular child support payments and Beverly has a court-ordered arrangement with her second oldest daughter's father. Two of the five Latin-American women, Marta and Paula, have been on public assistance within the last five years, but only Marta received benefits and child support during the study. All ten of the mothers and their children receive MassHealth, the Massachusetts form of Medicaid. Four mothers in the group, two African-Americans and two Latin-Americans, receive Food Stamps. Two African-American and three

3. All respondents' names have been changed to pseudonyms. Indicated ages and wages are from the time of recruitment into the study.

4. In this article, second generation immigrants are those who are born in the U.S. to foreign-born parents or who are foreign-born themselves and arrived in the U.S. as children.

5. We include Puerto Ricans in the category of first and second generation immigrants because of their similarities with the rest of our Latin-American respondents. They share the Spanish language and the need to learn English. In addition, they undergo a process of acculturation within a disadvantaged context.

6. As Cecilia Menjivar (1997, 2000) and others have shown, illegal immigration status limits access to services and benefits. However, all the women in this analysis had legal status in the United States and were able to access benefits they required. Three of the Latin-Americans were born in U.S. territory and the other two came to the U.S. as permanent residents sponsored by family members who came before them.

7. The Massachusetts version of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) is called Temporary Aid to Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC).

Latin-American mothers use the Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC).

All the respondents have housing subsidies, which limit their rental costs to 30 percent of their incomes. All the Latin-American mothers live in public housing developments, and all of the African-American mothers receive Section 8 vouchers. In addition, while all the Latin-American mothers live with at least one other adult (either their mothers or, in Josefa's case, a husband), with the exception of Dara, all the African-American mothers live with no other adults.<sup>8</sup> The housing subsidies and household arrangements are themselves aspects of the women's resource attainment strategies, since finding affordable housing is a constant challenge.

Although wages and government assistance cover key portions of the women's expenses, other costs remain. In addition, non-monetary support is needed in terms of childcare, emotional support, and connections to entry-level jobs. Our discussion now turns to the women's social support networks, which consist of those individuals on whom the women rely in part for their day-to-day survival.

### **Strategies for Survival: Developing a Social Support Network**

Briggs (1998) contends that social capital is generated through ties that offer social support or social leverage. We begin with an analysis of the relationships in our respondents' lives that help them with day-to-day survival. Respondents develop their social support networks from four primary sources: family, friends, husbands or boyfriends, and social service agencies. These sets of relationships are not mutually exclusive; some draw from these sources to varying degrees to establish a more extensive and diverse network. As Nelson (2000) highlights, creating and maintaining support relationships is challenging work that involves learning how, when, and whom to ask for assistance. To examine this aspect of social capital, we describe the social support networks of the respondents, analyze how and why such compositions change over time, and analyze the various ways in which the women generate social support.

#### ***Family-Based Networks***

A primary reliance on family-based networks is prominent among the younger mothers in the analysis: Marta, a 21-year-old Puerto Rican; Camila, a 19-year-old Dominican; Marcela, a 24-year-old Puerto Rican; and Dara and Shelly, 23-year-old African-Americans. Marta, with two children, and Camila, with one, continue to live in their mothers' houses and are able to count on emotional and child-rearing support from the family members who reside in their households. As Marta explained, "my mother and my sister are my best friends, I tell them everything." Marta and Camila also benefit from long-term boyfriends who provide emotional support, demonstrating an ability to listen and "be there" when a friend is needed (Birch 1998). Such support can mediate stress that may otherwise be debilitating (Kim and McKenry 1998). Although Ray is not the biological father of Camila's daughter, she credits him for having been there "since the beginning": "We met when I was pregnant, can you believe it? . . . and he took me to all the [doctor's] appointments . . . and he was there for the birth. And here we are, still together after three years . . . Claudia [Camila's daughter] calls him *Papi*."

Living in extended households also allows for greater flexibility in allocating economic and domestic roles (Angel and Tienda 1982; Stack and Burton 1993). All of the respondents have at least one family member who provides either occasional or full-time childcare. As

8. These housing choices could be a function of age. While the mean age of the African-American mothers is 31, the mean age of the Latin-American mothers is only 25; the African-American mothers have had more time to establish their own households.

Dennis Hogan and associates (1990) point out, the availability of free childcare and the pooling of resources is a strong motivation for living in extended family households. Marta depends on her sister to take care of her children when she works, while Camila's mother—a licensed family day care provider who took care of Claudia as an infant—continues to care for Claudia when needed. These arrangements allowed respondents to leave their young children at home throughout the study, avoiding potentially worrisome childcare arrangements outside the family, as well as time-consuming transportation. Our respondents' experiences are consistent with much of the research that finds that young mothers benefit the most when living with extended family as opposed to living alone (Kahn and Berkowitz 1995).

Respondents identified at least three issues that work alone or in combination to positively or negatively influence their use of family as sources of social support: *physical proximity*, *reciprocity*, and *family tensions*. When Beverly, a 36-year-old African-American mother of four, moved in to her current apartment, her level of contact with her family changed. Though her siblings continued to provide babysitting and emotional support, the fact that they now lived at least 30 minutes away from each other made that support sporadic. They continue to speak regularly and celebrate holidays together, but Beverly and her siblings operate their households independently. As Briggs (1998) notes, this kind of disruption of social networks is frequently a by-product of a family's relocation for affordable and available housing.

Others moved closer to family to be able to take advantage of social support ties. Shelly described feeling isolated in Boston with little family in the area; she indicated that depending on friends and boyfriends for emotional and financial support yielded useful but inconsistent help. When Shelly decided to change jobs six months into the study, she knew that shuffling her schedule and the overall transition would require more support than her father and brother, who lived 30 minutes away, could offer. To tap into a larger support network, she joined her extended family in New Jersey and moved in with her mother. The opportunity to change environments and expand her everyday survival network appealed to her, even if it meant moving to a new city:

Like with me moving, I can find another job. And with my mom around, she can help me with Myla [her daughter] while I figure out my schedule. She won't keep Myla forever. I'll have to find day care soon but my mom will help me while I get it together.

Reciprocity is another important element of the women's social support networks. Marcela came to the Boston area a few years ago and, after a long period of homelessness, was able to obtain public housing with her 3-year-old daughter, Naomi. When her mother, Teresa, decided to move to Boston, Marcela invited her to live with her and Naomi. Although Teresa suffers from depression and physical disabilities related to past domestic violence, she is able to contribute money, meal preparation, and childcare to the household. With her mother's support, Marcela has been able to use work and school to improve her English to get ahead. Reciprocally, Teresa's depression has improved greatly over time with her daughter's help.

In other cases, however, the division of household labor results in unbalanced reciprocity, making reliance on family help quite stressful. Dara, mother of a three-year-old boy, is a prime example. Dara's mother provides her with two major resources: housing and childcare while Dara works the night shift. Unlike Marta, Camila, Marcela, and Shelly—who report that their family-based social support networks come at little cost due to their families' relatively harmonious relationships—Dara describes a different experience:

A big problem is that my mother pays maybe half the rent, the gas bill, the light bill, and her credit card bills out of her disability check. With my job [in a hospital cafeteria], I am supposed to buy all of the food for the five of us [Dara, her son Ronnie, her mother, her 14-year-old sister, and a 17-year-old cousin who was living with them], things for me and Ronnie, do the cooking and cleaning, and pay half the rent and any other family expenses. Plus, I pay the phone bill which is a big source of stress because I'm rarely home enough to use the phone, my sister is on it a lot of the time and

then people from our family come over, they use the phone, and run up the long distance bill. Alana, my older sister, used to do a lot of this [meeting household expenses] before she moved out.

Other respondents experience different kinds of conflicts that reduce their reliance on family. Both Paula and Tasha's family relationships are complicated by drug problems and alcohol abuse. Paula, a 25-year-old Puerto Rican mother of two, invited her mother, who was homeless, to live with her. Geographic distance prevents Paula from calling upon her only sister and extended family members, who live in Philadelphia. Paula counts on her mother to share expenses and provide some childcare, in exchange for welfare-related childcare vouchers. But this support comes at a cost. Her mother's periodic bouts of underemployment and alcohol consumption make her a source of financial and emotional strain. Paula had this to say about her mother:

She drinks on the weekend and then will come into my room saying "I want to talk to you" then starts off getting on my case about stuff she has been getting on my case [about] forever . . . things I should or shouldn't have done . . . I end up having to leave the house . . . now her boyfriend is in town and I had to warn him that he would have to leave my house if he doesn't bring back money he took . . . I understand her . . . she wants to settle down . . . but all of this is too much.

An ambivalent Paula says that while her mother is the most important adult in her life, her stay in Paula's home is only temporary, while she "gets her act together." This relationship between mother and daughter exists as a constant negotiation—yielding resources, but not without significant conflict.

Drug and alcohol abuse in some families makes the negotiation of resource exchange impossible. Tasha, a 40-year-old African-American mother of six boys, explained the tension she experienced when dealing with her two sisters, both of whom battle drug addiction. Each has come to Tasha's home on several occasions to ask her for money and a place to stay:

I wanted to be able to say that I helped them. But they don't want to hear me talk about the drug rehab, so they only come around when they really get in trouble. They have lived with me and the boys at some point. I had to start not opening the door for them and I instructed the boys to do the same. It was too crazy with them with the drugs. My sisters are a reminder of what it used to be like [when Tasha herself was drug-addicted] and I get defensive and arrogant around them. I don't like it.

Emotionally and often financially drained after their visits, Tasha made the decision to limit contact with her sisters. Tasha consistently works to preserve her sobriety and this includes cutting all contact with "using" family members or friends. It became clear to her that she had to reduce the level of contact and acquire her resources independently.

There is evidence that intergenerational exchange among families—regardless of race, class, or gender—is less prevalent than one might expect, and that families with limited socio-economic resources are even less involved in kin support (Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg 1993).<sup>9</sup> Our respondents and their families display the efforts that some families make to maintain solidarity and establish reciprocal exchanges. All of the mothers under 30 years old lived with their own mothers during the study. As we saw in the cases of Marta, Camila, Marcela, and Shelly, living with family creates opportunities for childcare, sharing of expenses, and emotional support in relatively harmonious households. This support is extremely valuable.

Our analysis takes the discussion a step further, teasing out some of the dynamics that may encourage or discourage intergenerational exchange among poor families. Conflicts complicate the women's decisions about the degree to which they will include family in their social support networks. Several factors shape the exchange of resources among families and friends, including physical distance, the ability to generate balanced reciprocity, and the capacity

9. The authors see this as a function of a lack of resources rather than a lack of readiness to invest. This challenges the view that extensive family support networks are common among poor families and supports the notion that many poor, multigenerational minority families lack the financial resources to meet the needs of all generations adequately.

to respond to interpersonal tensions while trying to make the best use of very scarce resources. Dara feels overtaxed by her arrangement with her mother while Tasha and Paula grapple with substance abuse in their families; these situations undermine reciprocity to varying degrees, making the mothers question whether relying on family is the best arrangement. Geographical distance also prevents Beverly and Paula from developing alternative family-based social support networks. These dynamics go beyond resource constraints and highlight the complexity of social support networks. As we will see in the next section, when families are unavailable or costly sources of support, the women must rely upon other forms of support.

### *Friendship-Based Networks*

Respondents without a strong and extensive family network rely on friends or combine ties to build alternative webs of support. Josefa recounted how, through immigration, she uprooted herself from extended networks of family in Honduras. Josefa's sister Juana and her family live in Boston and play a central role in Josefa's social support network. However, that is not enough for Josefa. Like many others in predominately minority communities, she has created networks of *fictive kin* (Stack 1974), which are "close friendship ties that replicate many of the rights and obligations usually associated with family ties" (Ebaugh and Curry 2000:189). Living with her employed husband, who provides steady financial and emotional support, adds to the household stability. This enables her to develop and nurture fictive kin ties, which facilitate the care of her children. Josefa is proud that "either one [of her friends including her sister] can calm the kids down and get them back in order." This kind of social support is generated on the basis of bounded solidarity and enforceable trust whereby in-group resources are pooled to the benefit of those in the network (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993).<sup>10</sup>

Paula also relies most heavily on a friendship-based set of relationships for social support to supplement the often-turbulent relationship with her mother. When asked about her friends' role in her ability to deal with the changes brought on by her boyfriend's murder, her own unemployment, and her loss of welfare benefits, Paula explained:

I probably could have done it by myself but I would have gone through more crying and struggling to figure what I was going to do. Because of them, I did it quicker and sooner. Specially Frank and Milie. . . . Frank gave me money and Milie gave me food . . . and they gave it to me right away, I didn't have to feel bad asking them.

While she gets emotional support from several girlfriends, Paula gets financial support from her relationships with men. She explained that her new boyfriend, Elias, has been giving her his paycheck for the last few weeks. "Yeah, he pays for the rent of the furniture . . . He just gives it to me, he knows that I need it," she reported. Nevertheless, as Menjívar (2000) demonstrates, these cross-gender exchanges do come at a cost. Frank sometimes buys Paula's groceries, but she must resist his periodic sexual advances. "We can be friends only when he is involved with somebody else," she commented. This combination of different types of relationships creates a social network that provides both the emotional and financial support that Paula requires for her family.

However, with the exceptions of Josefa and Paula, respondents describe how limited their friendship networks are and contend that asking friends for assistance often results in inconsistent help and draining relationships. As Beverly explained, "it brings trouble. People in your

10. Josefa's network is a good example of multiplexity, the "overlapping social networks where the same people are linked together across different roles" (Portes 1998). Several of her friends are also family members and neighbors, and two are co-workers. According to Jeremy Boissevain (1974:31-33) this overlapping of social networks strengthens the intensity and capacity for mutual monitoring of ties in the group. In this sense, multiplexity is very close to bounded solidarity and enforceable trust.

business and getting involved in your home in ways you don't want them to." Several respondents voiced a similar distrust with comments like "I keep to myself." Marta and Camila attributed their lack of friends to adolescent dynamics including "he said, she said" accusations and sexual betrayals by their girlfriends. Tasha, whose years of counseling for depression and drug recovery arm her with a language to express her suspicion of potentially draining individuals, described the dynamics in a training program in which she participated:

Being there got me to step back and think about what I'm really doing there and what I don't need to do. I don't need to get involved in cliques. I don't need to, on breaks, go and smoke cigarettes and bad rap . . . So that's what I did today. I brought my motivation with me, staying focused. Then there's two women who used to live where I used to live and one especially wanted to know where I moved to. She thought that I bought my own townhouse. I told her that it wasn't true . . . Trying to get in my business. I put affirmations in my walk and went on.

These sentiments support observations by Elliot Liebow (1967) and Lee Rainwater (1970), who argue that social relationships in areas of extreme poverty are frequently marked by ambivalence and distrust. Respondents in this analysis express a desire to actively avoid potentially problematic situations that they fear could create emotional or financial burden. Moreover, consistent with the literature on community mistrust, respondents express a great deal of suspicion towards neighbors and are cautious about making friends (Ross, Mirowsky, and Pribesh 2001).

To summarize, fictive kin and the use of friendship-based networks proved to be a useful way for some respondents to acquire social support. However, others expressed suspicion and trepidation about creating and relying on friendship ties for social support, fearing inconsistent support, manipulation, or disruption of household patterns. The level of trepidation and suspicion surrounding the generation of social capital through friendship-based ties pushed some of the mothers to look to other sources of support.

### *Institution-Based Networks*

Many analyses of social support networks exclude professional, institution-based relationships with social workers and service providers (Nelson 2000; Portes 1998). In addition, they neglect relationships between individuals that may be initiated by service providers—support groups for example. However, our research suggests that these ties offer a viable and important alternative when friendship- and family-based networks are unavailable or ineffective. Although social support is most often associated with "strong ties," we saw several examples of women receiving food, childcare, jobs, and even emotional support from social service providers who are in essence, "weak ties." This is consistent with Wellman and Gulia (1999), who argue that social relationships that are available and solidified by frequent contact are more likely to provide social support, regardless of whether they are composed of strong, intimate ties or simply active but non-intimate ties. At least three factors facilitate institutional support: competence, confidentiality, and the opportunity for the women to reciprocate on their own terms.

Perhaps the clearest illustration of this involves Karen, a 35-year-old mother of four-year-old Fara. Addicted to crack and diagnosed HIV positive one month before the birth of her child, Karen required extensive institutional support. Although her needs are probably more extensive than the other women in this study because she is a recovering drug user, HIV positive, and low-income, she represents a growing segment of the female population (Centers for Disease Control 2002).<sup>11</sup> Four years after Fara's birth, Karen has a network of six social service providers supplying ongoing drug recovery support, health care, and basic needs such as

11. African-American and Latin-American women together represent less than one-fourth of all U.S. women, yet they account for more than three-fourths (78 percent) of AIDS cases reported to date among women in our country.

childcare and food assistance. Her relationship with Darden, a historic community service agency, is the most extensive, involving the childcare center, clinic, and community center. As Dara explained, "I even got my meetings there [a monthly support group for HIV positive clients]. I'm the group secretary. They pay us \$25 per meeting and they give us dinner. I've been going for a year."

The way in which Karen parlays social service relationships into social ties that provide not only tangible items such as money, clothing, and food, but also strong emotional support and child-rearing assistance, is key to her success. While Karen's brother provides a great deal of emotional support and some financial assistance, Karen's multiple needs proved to be too much of a burden on her family. Neighborhood institutions compensated by contributing vast amounts of support; staff members have become, according to Karen, "friends too, almost like family." Jaia is a social work graduate student intern who referred Karen to the city's services for women living with HIV. Karen's description of their relationship suggests that she sees Jaia as much more than just an employee of the institution from which she draws resources; she sees her as a confidante:

I told her that I wanted to learn how to drive, she's gonna help me find the classes I could take. When she comes, I talk to her about my problems. It's better than talking to the people around here [her neighbors]. Your business don't get spread around and she don't come at all hours asking you for stuff. "Karen, can I borrow this? Karen, do you have any that?" . . . Me, my brother, and my father are close. But my brother's got a big-time job and my father lives far away. They give me money sometimes, but I don't want to bother them all the time. I'm very independent. Me, my mom, and my sister don't get along as well. They call all the time gossiping. My mother is an alcoholic. I don't like to be around that. I take care of myself. I don't need her for nothing . . . But I love talking to Jaia. She does not talk negative like some people. She supports me.

As her comments suggest, in some ways Karen prefers the support of service providers over the support of family and neighbors. It does not inconvenience her brother and father, allows her to avoid clashes with her mother and sister, and maintains a level of confidentiality that her neighbors do not offer. Further, although this assistance is consistent, it does not demand reciprocity.

While not as institutionally involved as Karen, Tasha also parlayed a social service relationship into a source of extensive social support. Having difficulty supporting her sons on her SSI check and TAFDC benefits, Tasha initially explored other options. Early in the study, the father of her 2-year-old twins provided sporadic child support. However, his drug problem soon precluded him from doing so. Tasha began calling a few girlfriends, an aunt, and a cousin for transportation, loans, and emotional support, but was wary of overburdening them: "We call each other 'our survival line.' If she [a friend] can't, she'll be honest and say it and then I just go on. None of us believe in being stuck. But you gotta remember that they struggle like I struggle."

Despite the help provided through Tasha's "survival line," the assistance was limited by a lack of resources. As a result, Tasha eventually turned to Reardon House. The non-profit agency provides childcare for her twins through its Early Intervention program and Tasha meets occasionally with a counselor in the agency's clinic. The child care workers and administrative staff know her well, and often provide emotional support to Tasha when she has difficulties with the boys. She frequently attends parent meetings as a favor to the staff, even for programs in which her sons do not participate. The childcare director even asked Tasha to help interview a woman who was applying for a job as a nurse with the Head Start program. Over time, Tasha began seeing the staff at Reardon house as her primary source of social support and validation. When it was time for her to obtain a job, Tasha went to the agency for help and was hired to work in the kitchen:

I needed to get out of the house and make some extra money. It made sense to go there. I can be supportive to them like they were to me. I can give back. So it made sense to work there. I don't pay

for daycare and I have twins! It didn't really have to be that way . . . I wanted to give back. So not only do I volunteer, I'll work there too and make sure that everything I do is a little extra than what's required.

Tasha's comments suggest that while she is paid for her employment, she sees her work and volunteerism as ways to reciprocate, but *on her own terms*. In fact, Karen, Tasha, and Beverly all cited staff members of neighborhood institutions as one of the first places they would go to secure both instrumental help and emotional support. Beverly makes a clear distinction between family- and institution-based support, helping to explain the prevalence of service providers in these respondents' networks:

I don't want to discuss what's going on with me and my kids too much with my sisters. My business will be everywhere—the church, people we know, whatever. I don't let them get too involved with what my situation is when they ask me how I'm doing. I like using counselors and people who work at places in the city that are supposed to help you. They know more than my family would, where to go for help, what to ask for.

However, the views of Karen, Tasha, and Beverly about the benefits of garnering social support from human service providers are not shared uniformly among respondents. As Paula and Marta reveal, the mothers must trust these agencies before they can include them in their social support networks.<sup>12</sup> Although Paula gets health services from the Anna Lewis Center, a comprehensive service delivery institution, she does not trust the staff members to maintain confidentiality. Paula's concerns prevent her from utilizing the agency to address her seven-year-old's needs for counseling:

I am worried about her, but what can I do? Where could I take her? Would they take her at Riverside Services when her doctor is at Anna Lewis? Anna Lewis does okay with health stuff and everything but I don't know . . . there all this *bochinche* [gossiping] there and people know your business . . . I don't want to take her there . . . all the *bochinche* worries me. I don't know what to do about this . . . it is so difficult.

As her statement suggests, Paula is not only worried about confidentiality at the Anna Lewis Center, but she is also constrained by managed care arrangements that may limit her access to a single health service provider.

Similarly, Marta's mistrust extends to neighborhood-based childcare programs. Her concerns are based on a negative experience with a childcare center: "I saw my child being pushed around by a 'tecata' [druggie] . . . I know her from around here . . . Nobody puts their hand on my child . . . why would I give responsibility for my child to her, a tecata?" Marta's apprehension could have negative consequences for the development of her children. Marta's younger sister, although a stable source of childcare, provides little stimulus for the children's intellectual and social development. By not enlisting community organizations in her social support network, Marta limits the quantity and quality of information and services that she can receive.

Beyond kinship and friendship ties, social service agencies provide Tasha, Karen, and Beverly with both instrumental and emotional support. While all the women in the study have network ties that are difficult to navigate or simply limited in what they can provide, these three women found an alternative means of obtaining reliable and confidential social support that allows them to reciprocate on their own terms. However, Paula and Marta hesitate to use social service agencies for social support; they don't trust institutions to help meet

12. Camila, Josefa, and Marcela joined the African-American mothers in enrolling their children in neighborhood Head Starts when they were age-eligible. They knew this would help prepare their children for school, but they worried about the cultural and language differences between their children and those of the majority white population in the neighborhood. Of the Latin-American women in the study, only Marta lived in a predominantly Latin-American neighborhood.

family needs. We will discuss the implications of this, and potential explanations for the disparity in trust in institutions among poor minority populations, in the concluding discussion.

### **Strategies for Mobility: Developing Networks for Social Leverage**

In Briggs' conceptualization, social capital includes social leverage along with social support. As respondents secure resources for survival, they generate social leverage by securing information and resources that may lead to socioeconomic mobility. We find that the women's social leverage depends largely on the nature and location of their employment because co-workers and customers directly and indirectly impart lessons to respondents that aid or hinder their economic success. In addition, we observe that the ability to balance the benefits and needs arising from support and leverage networks contributes to the women's abilities to secure and take advantage of opportunities. In this section, we describe the social leverage networks of the respondents, analyze how and why these networks change over time, and discuss the implications of the ways in which the women generate social leverage. Of particular interest are aspects of the networks that may either help or hinder respondents' socioeconomic mobility.

#### *The Importance of Type and Location of Employment*

Several of the women in this study benefited from heterogeneous networks in terms of employment outcomes, supporting observations highlighted in the literature (Granovetter 1995; Stoloff, Glanville, and Bienenstock 1999). Emi Ooka and Barry Wellman (2003) find that inter-ethnic ties are a beneficial resource for people whose ethnic groups are concentrated in lower-paying jobs because these ties tend to increase access to information and opportunities to act on such information.<sup>13</sup> The location and type of employment can provide low-income women with the "mere opportunity for contact" which Briggs (2002:40) considers to be a key factor in the formation of dissimilar ties or bridges. The next stage of our analysis provides an account of the ways in which access to heterogeneous ties combines with job ladders to create social leverage.

When Camila began participating in the study, she was working full-time as a server at a well-known coffee and sandwich chain restaurant. Located in Boston's medical district, Camila's job allowed her to interact with busy professionals who served as informal role models, an opportunity that Camila valued since she lived in a segregated low-income housing development. There was little opportunity for advancement in this job, however, so Camila took advantage of a friend's willingness to help her secure a position in a bank located in a multicultural, middle-class neighborhood. The new job offered room for advancement and the opportunity to interact with a professional clientele, plus a socioeconomically and racially heterogeneous group of co-workers. It didn't take long for Camila to set her sights on the bank's higher ranks, recognizing that connecting with well-positioned co-workers was key:

I know exactly what I have to do to go up the ladder all the way to branch manager . . . first you are a Teller then Customer Representative, you know . . . the ones with their own area and desk . . . then you can move up to assistant manager, then manager and lastly branch manager . . . My manager already told me that after six months, I'll be ready to move up to Customer Rep . . . I am the first to finish, I am always even . . . and customers like me . . . I go to lunch everyday [sometimes with the assistant manager] . . . that's how I got to be friends with the assistant manager.

13. This is consistent with Alexis Ferrand, Lisa Mounier, and Alain Degenne's (1999) findings based on social networks in France. They reveal that homophilous selection is strongest in the friendship realm, but that aid relations are less homophilous and more apt to connect the non-employed to paid workers.

Several months later, Camila was promoted to Customer Service Representative. As she excitedly explained, “Now I have my own desk. Cool. The place is very nice, my desk is huge. I’m working in [a very upscale neighborhood] at another branch.” In addition, she and her daughter moved out of public housing to a better neighborhood in Boston where “[She doesn’t] have to worry about the fresh . . . the bad kids . . . See the street? [pointing out the window] There are no kids hanging out here.” Camila’s hard work and good use of the opportunities afforded by her network paid off in career advancement and a better neighborhood.

While Camila’s opportunities were sparked through a strong tie, a weak tie created the leverage that Josefa parlayed into better job opportunities (Granovetter 1973, 1982). Josefa was working in a modest hotel that provided no benefits and few opportunities for her to expand her limited English language skills when she learned about a job opportunity through a co-worker:

There was this Bosnian man . . . he tells me that I am young and can speak better English and that I should get out of that dead end job and go to the [upscale hotel] where they are hiring. This job is giving me many opportunities, I have to speak English . . . I also get to meet so many people . . . there are so many things to do around there . . . so there I am, *desenvolviéndome* [unfolding, developing].

This new job has positioned Josefa for socioeconomic mobility. For the first time, she has access to private health insurance, vacation pay, and paid overtime. Through a job-based Credit Union, Josefa has been able to develop a line of credit and now has her own banking account and credit cards. She even credits the job with helping her to improve her children’s opportunities for upward mobility as her developing English language skills allow her to monitor their education and friendships.

Social ties not only provide leads on jobs, but also impart lessons about how to get ahead and function successfully in the work world. Shelly’s cousin referred her to a temporary agency with a good track record of finding people permanent, well-paying jobs. It paid off for her when a temporary assignment as a receptionist led to a medical billing position in the same office. Shelly reported that while she appreciated the comprehensive training that came with the job, her biggest lessons were from her interactions with her co-workers and supervisor, an African-American woman who took Shelly under her wing:

It’s educational because we have these staff meetings. Sometimes I’m like, “What are they talking about?” But they [the managers] talk about improvements that they want to see and they ask us what they can change to make it better for us . . . And then they were so supportive when I told them I was moving to New Jersey. My supervisor said that it was probably best for me to live where my mother lived. She even helped me write a letter of resignation, so I know how to do that now. And then she reminded me to ask the other supervisor for a reference letter to take with me and to email everyone that I worked with to say good-bye.

When she submitted her resignation letter, both of her supervisors invited her into their offices to talk about her future. The job’s socioeconomically and ethnically diverse staff was also advantageous for Shelly’s daughter Myla, whom Shelly occasionally brought to visit her workplace. “It’s cool because everyone is so nice to her . . . Plus she gets to get out of the neighborhood, see some different folks. I want her to be comfortable with all kinds of people,” Shelly reported. Shelly’s co-workers and supervisors act as bridges, providing her daughter with access to a diverse group of people and passing on to Shelly strategies for success in the workplace.

“Bridging” social leverage relationships can be mutually beneficial for actors positioned differently on the socioeconomic ladder. Initially, Paula’s social support network was homogeneous, made up entirely of single mothers who, like her, were school dropouts and relied on welfare for financial support. It was only through employment that Paula developed relationships outside this group. She was trained to work in childcare settings and was able to land a position as Assistant Director of a privately-run high-achievement preschool. Although

located in a disadvantaged area, the preschool attracts parents who see education as a way out of poverty. Through this job, Paula developed a friendship with Valerie, a socially mobile African-American woman who is also a single mother of one of the preschool's children. Valerie acts as a role model and bridge to a more advantaged environment, providing Paula with an understanding of how to get ahead. In turn, Paula serves as an attentive caretaker for Valerie's daughter. In a conversation about public assistance, Paula made the following comments:

You only deserve it [aid] if you are willing to do something with your life, you know . . . Like my friend Valerie, she has done it all on her own. She has worked hard and now she is manager for cosmetics at [a local department store]. She should be proud of herself, she brings me nice products so that I can look good . . . I guess that I was there for her daughter when she need it the most . . . I guess that she started later [having children] and she did more stuff to get herself ready.

Unfortunately, not all of the women have access to the kinds of jobs that provide opportunities for this sort of bridging. Marcela came to the United States with substantial post-secondary education but, in contrast to Josefa, her lack of fluency in English limited her opportunities to advance. She found herself trapped as an assistant manager in a supermarket located in a disadvantaged neighborhood with clients and employees of limited resources. The location of this job provided few chances for Marcela to meet people who would help her become upwardly mobile.

Beverly is in a similar situation. She began volunteering at a local neighborhood center as part of her community service requirement to receive TAFDC. Over the next two years, Beverly parlayed that position into a part-time, then full-time, job as a childcare worker. The job is not only conveniently located within walking distance of her home, but also has an inexpensive after-school program that her oldest daughters attend. However, while the location and ancillary services are beneficial, the job provides low wages, offers little opportunity for advancement, and is located in a disadvantaged neighborhood. Beverly's relationships with staff members, some of whom are college educated and have years of work experience, earned her information about employment training programs. However, despite completing several programs, she has not been able to land a higher paying job.

These examples demonstrate the importance of location and job type in the building of social leverage. Given the opportunity, Camila, Josefa, Paula, and Shelly took advantage of the support and advice of others at work. However, as Beverly's story illustrates, this act alone does not guarantee success. Access to better job opportunities also matters.

### *Social Support versus Social Leverage*

The capacity to balance the influence of social support networks with that of social leverage networks critically shapes respondents' abilities to secure and take advantage of opportunities for mobility. We found that in-group social controls, kin-scription, and emotional reliance on support networks can discourage the development of social leverage networks. Conversely, class variation within the support network can facilitate advancement.

As Lisa Dietrich (1998) and Lisa Dodson (1998) found in their studies of low-income women, intimate ties can discourage educational attainment by imposing gender expectations that focus heavily on child rearing and household duties. Marta described how staying in school became a point of contention with her boyfriend after she had her baby.

My baby's father wanted me to drop out . . . I never listen to him though . . . he wanted me to stay with him all the time . . . I would have never gotten anywhere if I had listened to him. It was my mother and me . . . I wanted to stay in school.

Although Marta's mother supports her pursuit of education, Marta knows that extended family members are slow to lend encouragement. In this case, enforceable trust serves as a

tool for social control that stifles, rather than encourages, Marta's pursuits (Portes 1998; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993):

It [pursuing education] would matter to me maybe . . . no one else would care . . . they would be jealous and they wouldn't talk to me anymore. They [her mother's side of the family] are a bunch of jealous people . . . my mother or us . . . we can't have anything better than them because they are so jealous. Pfuuff . . . they would not help me . . . they would say "hey, who do you think you are?" . . . They would say that I think I am too good for them. I can just see them . . . they would be so jealous . . . and they would start talking behind my back saying stupid shit. No, no . . . they wouldn't help me.

The division of household labor can also hamper women's abilities to take advantage of opportunities. For example, since Dara's older sister moved out of the home last year, Dara has been the sole caretaker of her mother, who suffers from obesity, diabetes, arthritis, and high blood pressure. As we noted earlier, Dara's relationship with her mother is mutually supportive, yet stressful. While Dara can afford to move out of her mother's home, she realizes that her younger sister and her mother could not take care of themselves adequately if she left. Dara's mother, fearful of the possibility of Dara's departure, has difficulty supporting Dara's attempts at mobility. Dara described what happened between them when she began taking phlebotomy classes:

She [her mother] kept talking about how the classes were such a waste of money. They were like \$200 and she was like, "That's too much. You need to take a class that's free." But I was telling her that you can make a lot of money in those jobs. But she always had something to say about it. Especially if I was running low on money, she talked about the money I was spending on the class.

Dara's household kin-scription thwarts her personal goals and dampens her ambitions. Her attempt to move up the social ladder by furthering her training and moving out of her mother's home would lower the level of everyday support that she could expect and provide. The fear of what Jeremy Boissevain (1974:89) describes as "a drastic reordering of social relations of the persons left behind" complicates and hinders Dara's chances for socioeconomic mobility.

Other respondents displayed their own trepidation when contemplating moves out of longstanding support networks. Marcela knew that she could find a higher paying job at a supermarket in a more advantaged area. Yet, she was having difficulty breaking off the relationship with her daughter's father, a man who is very abusive, presently in jail, and a source of emotional and financial drain. Marcela turned to her co-workers for emotional encouragement regarding this issue. For Marcela, giving up this work-based social support network at such a trying time was too risky.

However, once her crisis abated, Marcela developed a friendship with a woman who was attending the State University. This friend persuaded Marcela to quit her job and take a part-time position as a cashier with hours that permitted her to study English. Within a couple of months, she began to speak English during our interviews. Several months later, Marcela landed a job as an assistant manager in a retail store in an upscale English-speaking neighborhood. While she credited her former job with having prepared her to "know how to interact with people and achieve the self-control to behave the way I need to get ahead," she also knew that her friend's college attendance set an example for her.

The developments in Marcela's life suggest that heterogeneity in one's support network can introduce and promote opportunities for mobility. While Dara and Marta's support networks often work in tension with budding opportunities, Marcela, Camila, and Karen's networks work in tandem with them. Camila's support network is diverse; her boyfriend, also a second generation Dominican immigrant, comes from a middle-class family. In addition, her older sister is college-educated and employed in a professional position. Both individuals reinforce her career and educational drive. Camila also receives encouragement from her

co-workers at the bank, which often offsets negative opinions sometimes expressed by her friends. When asked about reactions to her decision to go on to college, she explained:

Tanya [a former classmate who is also a young single mother living in public housing] said, "Jeez, that must be so hard . . ." She couldn't understand why I bothered. At work [at the Bank] they told me nothing but good things . . . everybody is happy for me . . . A [co-worker] is questioning why I am in a Community College; they want me to transfer to a regular college. I started to look into it and it may be worth it. I gotta see.

Karen's college-educated brother Donald, a professional employed at a sports arena and owner of a three-family home, also encourages Karen to get ahead. Donald even offered to pay for classes if Karen agreed to go back to school: "My brother believes in me. He tells me to keep negative people out of my life, to keep drama out of my life. He tells me all the time that I should go back to school, that I need to improve myself."

Through these examples, we see the importance of the social support network in the development of social leverage. As Camila, Karen, Marcela, and Paula demonstrate, class variation in social support networks is important to learning what is necessary for mobility. The exposure to upwardly mobile individuals can act as a bridge, not only encouraging the women to further their education and careers, but providing concrete advice on how to do it. As Marcela's case suggests, a seemingly dead-end job can become a stepping stone for mobility, with the right kind of social connections. On the other hand, as we saw with Dara and Marta, a strong social support network can work at cross-purpose with one's social leverage network ties. This interdependence between social support and social leverage suggests that social support networks can both provide and hinder better opportunities.

### **Climbing or Just Surviving? Social Capital Among Low-income Mothers**

In this analysis, we explored how low-income Latin-American and African-American mothers employ social capital to both make ends meet and get ahead in life. By applying Briggs' conceptualization, we were able to examine separately two different aspects of social capital at the individual level (social support and social leverage), and then explore their relationship to each other. In describing the conditions under which these mothers utilize network ties, we were particularly interested in how such strategies change over time. This perspective emphasizes the importance of viewing the production and use of social capital as processes rather than static enterprises. Our findings reveal that, beyond economic resources, several factors constrain, complicate, or promote social capital for low-income mothers, which, in turn, have important implications for their daily survival and socioeconomic mobility.

#### ***Social Support***

As we have seen, some of the women in this study rely upon family and extended kinship networks for support, while others supplement or replace those networks with alternative means of support. We saw instances where women used familial ties for social support in ways that are consistent with a literature that describes minority populations as prioritizing family well-being over individual well-being (see Moore and Pachon 1985; Roschelle 1997). Our observations are also reminiscent of classic studies of extended African-American families in the 1960s and 1970s, where pooling resources aided in survival (Liebow 1967; Rochelle 1997; Stack 1974).

The structural socioeconomic conditions that William Julius Wilson (1987, 1996) contends worsened the everyday conditions for low-income people may have lessened the ability of poor families to help each other. Anne Roschelle (1997:196), who studied the social sup-

port networks of European-Americans, African-Americans, and Latin-Americans, argues that, “despite their adherence to cultural norms valuing familism, the constraints of a hostile economic system may prevent minority families from participating in exchange networks.” Similarly, Menjívar (2000) found that economic strife ruptured kinship ties by making it impossible for individuals to reciprocate.

However, our analysis uncovered other factors that complicate the production of social capital within families—dynamics that involve navigating physical distance, balancing reciprocity, and dealing with tensions within the family. Although we agree that issues relating to economic resources are key for low-income mothers, we also believe concerns about accessibility, reciprocity, and interpersonal dynamics play central roles as these women create and use social support networks for daily survival. In cases where women seek out friendships to generate the social support they cannot rely on from family networks, reciprocity and trust emerge as central concerns. Women who turn to non-profit institutions do so only when competence, confidentiality, and the ability to reciprocate on their own terms can be established. In other words, in developing social support networks, low-income mothers look beyond the mere ability of social network partners to supply economic resources. The women we studied also try to protect their own money, time, and emotional reserves to minimize the costs of relying on others.

The creation of a social support network based largely on familial, friendship, or institutional ties has several important implications. Our data suggest that living with another adult, like many of the young mothers do, can provide access to resources unavailable to those who live alone or only with children (see Wacquant and Wilson 1989). By sharing publicly subsidized housing, primarily with their mothers, these women are able to pool resources, lower costs, and satisfy basic survival needs (Menjívar 1997). By incorporating friends into their networks, some mothers are able to involve these friends in the child-rearing process and receive emotional as well as instrumental support.

On the downside, single mothers living with other adults must be able to negotiate interpersonal tensions and the terms of reciprocity. The kinscripts that allow some women to work while their mothers and sisters contribute childcare can leave others feeling overburdened and stifled in their quests for mobility. In addition, an over-reliance on family and close friends may reduce a woman’s drive to increase her network size, limiting her access to useful information and resources (Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998).

We saw several clear examples of mothers abandoning the dense, insular, and localized neighbor and familial-based networks described in Carol Stack’s *All Our Kin* (1974) in favor of an institution-based network that was able to provide financial, child rearing, and emotional support. While scholars like James Coleman (1988); Robert Putnam (2000); and Catherine Ross, John Mirowsky, and Shana Pribesh (2001) are concerned with increasing mistrust in disadvantaged neighborhoods and a general decline of social capital, our research uncovered a new source of trust and social capital: social service organizations. These institutions go beyond providing the basic services advertised and are becoming important links in the women’s social support networks. Some institution-based networks provide clear advantages such as reliable, high quality resources and relationships that are less stressful and burdensome in terms of reciprocity. In addition, in a context of segregation and disadvantage, service professionals can serve as social mobility bridges, connecting low-income mothers with appropriate strategies and tools.<sup>14</sup>

Social service institutions like Reardon House and Darden have historical roots in disadvantaged neighborhoods heavily populated with African-Americans. They have worked hard

14. It is important to note that the possibility of exposure to socially mobile individuals depends on the make-up of the staff in the particular agency. Nevertheless, while agency staff members cannot necessarily, by definition, be considered socially mobile, they can still serve as role models.

to achieve the trust required to serve these communities, and our group of African-American mothers suggests how effective they have become. On the other hand, some of our Latin-American respondents faced barriers when trying to gain access to social service organizations. As Menjívar (2000) suggests, social service organizations in some cities have risen to the challenge of helping Latin-American newcomers navigate the immigration process. However, there are limitations on the provision of social services for immigrants and children who are already settled (Waters 2001). Cultural and language differences, gender, institutional problems, and neighborhood poverty are all factors related to the under-utilization of social services by the Latin-American population (Ramirez 1999; Sue and Zane 1987). These factors are especially problematic in cities that have experienced rapid growth in their Latin-American immigrant populations, outpacing the resources and number of bilingual and bicultural professionals. Without long-term, culturally-responsive services, community trust is difficult to establish. Paula and Marta's high levels of mistrust, coupled with the few institutional options available to them, kept them from trying to generate social capital through institutions. Their experiences suggest that social service organizations have a challenge ahead if they are to adequately serve the burgeoning population of low-income Latin-Americans.

Despite their numerous benefits, social service organizations can also place clients in potentially dangerous positions (Schilling 1987). First, the implementation of welfare reform hinges on the availability of family-based safety nets and social service institutions. As we saw in our study, mothers who do not have extended families count on social service organizations for their often far-ranging needs. As a result of such demands, these organizations may not always be able to dedicate the time and resources to provide the range of both instrumental and emotional support that some mothers have come to expect, and to a degree, depend upon. Over-reliance on community-based organizations could leave these women highly vulnerable to agency policy changes and budget cuts.

Second, these service organization-client relationships raise an issue of reciprocity that may be problematic in the long run. Nelson (2000:304) found that when low-income mothers identified support givers as more fortunate than themselves, they saw gratitude, emotional support, and loyalty as not merely vital elements of repayment for goods and services received, but sometimes as the only appropriate form of repayment. For example, Karen and Tasha would argue that their volunteering and working at the agencies that provide them with so much support is a form of repayment, on their own terms. They would dispute the notion that their relationships with these service providers are simply patron-client. In no position to give back exactly what they received, this logic of reciprocity allows the mothers to believe in their own self-sufficiency, while relying on a great deal of support from others. However, this perception of network ties and obligations can absolve the mothers from the responsibility of building social capital with family or friends, allowing them to avoid the challenges (and the potential opportunities) that come from negotiating relationships. Further, it may not serve the women well to rely on relationships with service providers for social support if these professionals do not view their clients from a strengths perspective—as persons worthy of opportunities for advancement—but rather as having specific needs and specific deficits (Cowger 1998; Saleebey 1997). Paul Johnston, Michael Rowe, and Patrick Swift (1995) argue that local service institutions often define poverty as resulting from individual pathology, isolating low-income people and blaming them for their own isolation. As a result, the authors suggest that the “very agencies meant to relieve poverty may actually contribute to the economic and social isolation that is at the root of the problem” (363).

### *Social Leverage*

As we found among our respondents, the kind of social capital that generates opportunities for mobility can emerge from networks that provide advice and encouragement to get ahead. Consistent with Wilson's argument in *When Work Disappears* (1996), employment plays

an important role in the incorporation of socially excluded women into heterogeneous social networks, allowing access to more diverse resources and information on jobs, education, and how to get ahead.<sup>15</sup> We found that some jobs are better than others at positioning women for contact with socioeconomically-advantaged individuals. Location alone does not dictate the development of social leverage. Respondents working in economically advantaged areas are not guaranteed access to resources, just as respondents working in disadvantaged areas are not necessarily denied access. What seems to matter is the heterogeneity of the ties within the locality and the women's abilities to build the kinds of relationships that will result in shared information.

We also found that social support and social leverage networks can work in tandem or in tension. Support networks can exert a pull away from social mobility ties that is difficult to resist. They enforce kin-scripts that levy time-consuming and professionally limiting expectations on women. Fulfilling the expectations of others becomes difficult when these networks are essential for daily survival. Conflicts arising from efforts to advance beyond others in one's social support networks also loom for some of the study's respondents. As Camila's story suggests, the size and heterogeneity of social leverage networks become important if one wants to resist the inertia of longstanding social support networks. As Karen's brother demonstrates, sometimes just one person can make a difference. Marcela's story highlights that, in time, introducing heterogeneity through one relationship can lead one to pull far enough away from her social support network to further her education. Heterogeneous networks may encourage low-income women to look beyond their present circumstances and learn from those who are more upwardly mobile.

Although the presented analysis is mainly structural, we do not want to underestimate the individual qualities that these women possess. As many of the women demonstrate, a sense of self-efficacy or agency is instrumental in developing heterogeneous ties and taking advantage of the opportunities those relationships might present. Agency comes into play as the women take risks and venture beyond the pull exerted by their support networks into what their leverage networks may offer. Many of the women developed their human capital—by learning English, taking classes, and increasing their skills—to be more competitive in the labor market. These personal developments, along with the astute use of social capital, allowed many of the women we studied to advance socially and economically.

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15. Consistent with what is known about the importance of economic context, many of the women benefited from the booming economy of the late 1990s in which workers with little education and work experience were able to secure jobs that could potentially lead to mobility. However, as the labor market changes, access to jobs with potential advancement may decline, hampering the social mobility prospects of low-income women.

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