



Social Capital and Neighborhood Poverty

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PART II:
THEORY INTEGRATION
AND PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

Social Capital and Neighborhood Poverty:
Toward an Ecologically-Grounded Model
of Neighborhood Effects

Kathy Lemon Osterling

ABSTRACT. Research indicates that concentrated neighborhood poverty has numerous detrimental effects on the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. The term “neighborhood effects” has been used to describe the interaction between socioeconomic disadvantage and social problems at the neighborhood level. Social capital theory, defined broadly as social networks characterized by trust and reciprocity represents one prominent explanation for the phenomenon of neighborhood effects. Within poor neighborhoods, it is theorized that socioeconomic characteristics of the neighborhood foster inadequate social capital and it is this low level of social capital that leads to the phenomenon of neighborhood effects. In order to explore the utility of social capital theory in explaining neighborhood effects, this paper argues for an ecologically-grounded model of social capital that allows for

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the different ways in which social capital operates within different types of neighborhoods. Implications for social work practice, policy and education are discussed. doi:10.1300/J137v16n01_09 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing interest in understanding the impact of neighborhood-level poverty on the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities. This growing interest has been partially fueled by a national increase in the rate of concentrated neighborhood poverty. Between 1970 and 2000, extremely high-poverty census tracts (defined as a neighborhood poverty rate of $\geq 40\%$) jumped from 1,662 to 2,222 and the number of poor residents of high-poverty neighborhoods increased from 4.9 million in 1980 to 6.7 million in 2000 (Kingsley & Pettit, 2003). Research also suggests that urban and central city areas are more likely to include high-poverty neighborhoods than are suburban areas, and that African Americans and Hispanics tend to be overrepresented in these communities (Berube & Frey, 2002; Kingsley & Pettit, 2003; Jargowsky, 2003). The rise in concentrated neighborhood poverty, especially within urban communities of color has brought with it an associated increase in a number of other neighborhood-level indicators of social distress. Studies consistently find an empirical association between neighborhood-level socioeconomic disadvantage and many other social problems including unemployment, crime, health problems, child maltreatment, low educational achievement, and mental, physical, behavioral, and educational problems—especially among children and youth (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealander, 1993; Jargowsky, 1997; Pettit, Kingsley, Coulton, & Cigna, 2003). The term “neighborhood effects” has been used to describe this simultaneous presence of neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage with social problems occurring on a neighborhood level (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002).

The co-occurrence of neighborhood-level poverty and other community social problems is a well-documented phenomenon (Sampson et al.,

2002), but theorists and researchers have only recently focused attention on the specific mechanisms through which neighborhood conditions in high-poverty areas are associated with poor outcomes. Social capital theory represents one prominent explanation for the phenomenon of neighborhood effects. Robert Putnam (2000) popularized the term social capital and defined it broadly as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). It is theorized that social networks and social processes can generate a variety of resources that can contribute to overall community well-being (James, Schulz, & van Olphen, 2001). Within poor neighborhoods, it is theorized that socioeconomic characteristics of the neighborhood can foster inadequate social capital and it is this low level of social capital that leads to the phenomenon of neighborhood effects.

Theorists from social science disciplines (e.g., sociology, political science, economics, psychology, and anthropology) have used social capital as an explanation for a wide variety of problems ranging from such large-scale issues as the economic development of states and countries and eroding national democracy, to smaller-scale issues such as the wide range of social problems that fall under the rubric of neighborhood effects. As such, social capital theory represents a uniquely interdisciplinary theory. This rise in popularity of social capital theory has encouraged an important shift away from traditionally individualistic interpretations of social problems (Sampson, 2001). Rather than focusing solely on human behavior, social capital theory encourages a discourse that considers the broader social environment and emphasizes the importance of social processes in the development and amelioration of social problems; in doing so, social capital theory helps to capture some of the complexity of such social problems as poverty, crime, poor educational outcomes, and health and mental health problems (Sampson, 2001). As such, social capital theory is also closely aligned with the ecological tenets of the social work profession. The field of social work is unique in its long-held acknowledgement of the importance of viewing the person within her or his environment. Social capital theory’s emphasis on linking micro and macro processes is consistent with social work’s person-in-environment perspective.

The available evidence suggests that social capital does play some role in neighborhood effects (Saegert, Thompson, & Warren, 2001). Yet, a critical analysis of social capital theory reveals limitations to its explanatory capability. Much of the work on social capital fails to adequately acknowledge or incorporate the context of social capital (Foley & Edwards,

1999). While social capital focuses on the relationship between neighborhood and individual, the ecological context of the neighborhood is not often incorporated into the discussions of social capital's mediating functions and resulting resources. Yet the specific context of communities, as well as larger macro-level forces are crucial to our understanding of how social capital operates in poor neighborhoods.

Community attributes such as economic capital, political power, and neighborhood resources all serve to enhance the ability of social capital to yield a positive return to the community (Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001). As James et al. (2001) note, "social networks in poor communities may be quite strong, but these networks may have a critical undersupply of certain critical resources (such as political power)" (p. 169). The unequal distribution of resources and access to decision-making between poor communities and more affluent communities is well documented (Wilson, 1996, 1987) and research consistently identifies high concentrations of poverty and racial segregation within certain neighborhoods—especially those in urban areas (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987). The failure of social capital theory to adequately integrate the potential effects of these inequities suggests that the theory reflects primarily White middle-class norms about neighborhoods by which other neighborhoods are compared. This potential bias can limit our understanding of how social capital operates in low-income neighborhoods. The concept of social capital really only begins to have utility in explaining neighborhood effects in poor communities when we fully consider the ramifications of the inequities that exist between neighborhoods, the differing social contexts that result from these inequities, and the impact these factors have on social capital's ability to yield a positive return for the community.

In order to improve social capital theory's utility in explaining neighborhood effects, theoretical refinement of the concept is warranted. Specifically, this paper argues for locating social capital within the specific ecological context in which it is operating in order to identify different pathways through which social capital operates within different types of neighborhoods. Delineating these pathways can improve our understanding of neighborhood effects in poor communities and reduce the biases inherent in many contemporary discussions of social capital. Moreover, identification of the types of social networks and social processes that contribute to resources within poor neighborhoods has the potential to inform practice, policy, and research.

SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

The roots of social capital theory can be traced to the functionalist tradition within classical sociology. In particular Emile Durkheim's ([1893], 1963) work on linking human behavior and social environment serves as a strong foundation for contemporary social capital theory (Loury, 1977; Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Putnam, 2000). Loury (1977) used the term social capital in an attempt to highlight the inadequacy of traditional economic theory and its overly narrow focus on individual human capital as the driving force in economic progress, especially the income disparities between Black and White youth. Instead of looking only at an individual's level of human capital (education, family support, workplace skills, etc.), Loury argued that human capital is closely linked to social context and social origin:

An individual's social origin has an obvious and important effect on the amount of resources that is ultimately invested in his or her development. It may thus be useful to employ a concept of "social capital" to represent the consequences of social position in facilitating acquisition of the standard human capital characteristics. (p. 176)

According to Loury, the economic positions of social groups and communities determine, in large part, the differing types of opportunities available to Black and White youth. Loury incorporated the notion of social capital into discussions of human capital and economic progress in order to highlight the inherent inequity of social processes and conditions. He states, "The social context within which individual maturation occurs strongly conditions what otherwise equally competent individuals can achieve" (p. 176). As such, Loury's conceptualization of social capital focuses on the utility of the concept to help explain differential economic outcomes between minorities and non-minorities.

Although Loury's definition of social capital was rather circumscribed, Bourdieu (1985) refined social capital theory somewhat by viewing it as a tool used to facilitate the production of other forms of capital. Specifically, Bourdieu (1985) 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—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a

“credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. (pp. 248-249)

In essence, social capital embodies both social networks themselves as well as the types of resources that are expected to result from membership in a group. Bourdieu (1985) also sought to explain the divisions between classes and the role of capital in accessing and producing power and resources (DeFilippis, 2001; Schuller, Baron, & Field, 2000). Social capital is valuable because it can increase access to power and other forms of capital.

Following Bourdieu, Coleman expanded social capital theory considerably by arguing that social capital is a critical component in the creation of human capital. For Coleman, “social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors” (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). Coleman acknowledged that social capital is not tangible like physical capital, and it is less tangible than human capital because it exists in the “*relations among persons*” (Coleman, 1988, pp. S100-S101, italics in original). Yet, like physical and human capital, social capital can “facilitate productive activity” (p. S101). He states, “For example, a group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust” (p. S101). In effect, social capital is an asset that is realized through specific types of social relations and benefits not only individuals within groups, but also benefits the collective as well. For instance, norms and sanctions “do not benefit primarily the person or persons whose efforts would be necessary to bring them about, but benefit all those who are part of such a structure” (Coleman, 1988, p. S116). In this sense, social capital is a resource realized by a collective; even if one member does not contribute directly to the functions of social capital, they will have access to resources and benefits by virtue of their membership in a group.

Perhaps the most widely known social capital theorist is Putnam (2000) who argues that social capital in the U.S. has declined considerably in recent years. Putnam defines social capital as social networks, trust, and norms of reciprocity, and links social capital to the “civic virtue” associated with civil society. Using de Tocqueville’s ([1835] 1969) concepts of civil society and democracy, Putnam conceives of civic associations as the cornerstone of social capital within a successful democratic state. In Tocqueville’s view, civic associations fostered engagement in political life and also served as a mechanism through which effective norms and societal stability could be achieved (Cohen,

2001). Putnam is specifically interested in the links between the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that can result from strong social networks and civic engagement. Like Tocqueville, Putnam envisions civic participation as an integral aspect of successful societies. He states, “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19). For Putnam, social capital is beneficial because it promotes democratic institutions and civil society, which he equates with people working together for mutual interests and shared goals.

Putnam also describes social capital as both a private good and/or a public good and distinguishes between two different types of social capital: “Bridging” and “Bonding” social capital. Bridging social capital encompasses outward looking networks that connect diverse groups of people and can be useful as a source of information or external assets. Bonding social capital refers to inclusive and dense social networks within fairly homogenous groups that can be a source of support and strong in-group trust and reciprocity. Putnam believes that both bonding and bridging capital can be helpful and can occur simultaneously as well as reinforce each other.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AS AN EXPLANATION FOR NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS IN POOR NEIGHBORHOODS

The basic assumption of social capital theory as an explanation of neighborhood effects is that poor neighborhoods are theorized to be lacking in a variety of different types of social capital and as a result, residents of the community do not benefit from the resources that emerge from social relations. Using Putnam’s concepts of bridging and bonding social capital, the following section describes mechanisms through which different types of social capital can help to explain specific neighborhood effects in high-poverty communities.

Bridging Social Capital

Putnam (2000) describes bridging social capital as inclusive social networks that link diverse groups. Bridging social capital is considered beneficial because it can link people to resources, information and norms of behavior that may not be available within their own social network. As an explanation for neighborhood effects, a lack of bridging

social capital can be conceived of as operating through two mechanisms within poor neighborhoods:

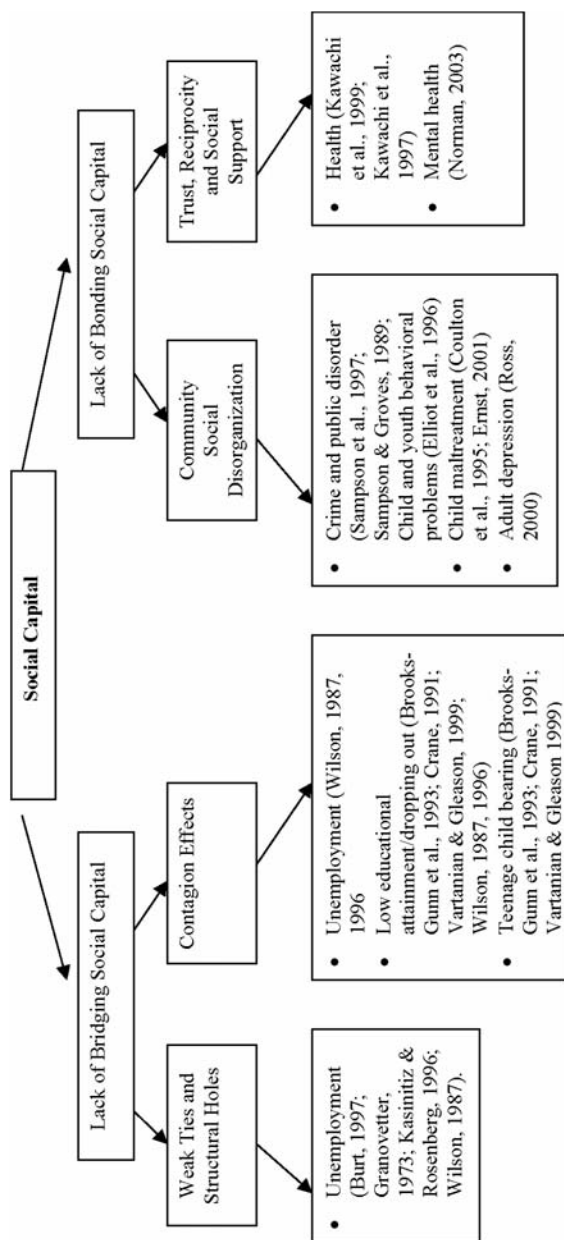
1. A lack of bridging social capital may be associated with the lack of connections or even “weak ties” and an ineffective use of “structural holes.” Weak ties and structural holes are a reflection of social networks that extend beyond one’s immediate social group and bring with them opportunities for information not available in one’s own social group (Burt, 1997; Granovetter, 1973).
2. A lack of bridging social capital may exacerbate the social isolation of poor neighborhoods, resulting in a lack of contact with positive, prosocial role models; this situation may create a “contagion effect” in which maladaptive norms of behavior are spread more easily—especially among children and youth (Crane, 1991; Vartanian, & Gleason, 1999).

Weak Ties and Structural Holes

Putnam’s conceptualization of bridging social capital as a type of social network that links diverse groups draws heavily on Granovetter’s (1973) concepts related to “the strength of weak ties.” Granovetter (1973) defines “weak ties” as social networks that extend beyond one’s immediate social group; because weak ties are considered to yield opportunities and information not available within one’s own social group, they are important resources for upward mobility. Similarly, Burt (1987) describes the importance of social networks that extend beyond one’s own social group with his concepts of “structural holes” that are defined as “the gaps between non-redundant contacts” (p. 341). Like weak ties, non-redundant contacts within a social network are considered important because they provide information on opportunities that are “additive rather than redundant” (p. 341). Burt (1997) explicitly links social capital theory to the concept of structural holes by describing social capital as a “function of brokerage opportunities in a network” (p. 340). In essence, when an individual spans a structural hole, that person can gain important information and opportunities not available within her/his own network.

Bridging social capital, weak ties and structural holes are social capital concepts typically associated with employment outcomes and illustrated in Figure 1. Bridging social capital in the form of weak ties and structural holes is viewed as an important mechanism that links individuals to job opportunities they would otherwise not be aware of. For

FIGURE 1. Social Capital as an Explanation of Neighborhood Effects in Poor Communities



instance, Granovetter's (1973) work was born out of his discovery that people seeking employment often heard of job opportunities through social contacts they did not know well—thus coining the term “the strength of weak ties.” In a similar way, Burt derived his concept of structural holes primarily within the context labor and organizational settings by perceiving the spanning of structural holes as an example of entrepreneurial behavior. Within an employment-based setting, individuals who take advantage of structural holes are then able to move up the organizational ladder (Burt, 1997).

An absence of “weak ties” or the ineffective use of “structural holes” within low-income communities is thought to foster unemployment (and accompanying economic distress) within these neighborhoods. Wilson (1987) suggests that poor and racially segregated neighborhoods are socially isolated from mainstream society and are thus disconnected from what he defines as a “job network” (p. 60). In other words, the social isolation of poor neighborhoods decreases the chances that residents within these neighborhoods can establish weak ties and take advantage of structural holes. This absence of bridging social capital can lead to a lack of information about job opportunities and thereby hinder the ability of residents in poor neighborhoods to find jobs. This situation perpetuates the socioeconomic disadvantage within the neighborhood (Kasinitz & Rosenberg, 1996).

Contagion Effects

In addition to the concepts within bridging social capital, the social isolation of poor neighborhoods is also thought to decrease the exposure of community members to mainstream, prosocial norms of behavior (Wilson, 1987, 1996). As a result of this social isolation and lack of positive norms, certain social problems may be transmitted through peer influences, a process commonly referred to as a “contagion effect” (Crane, 1991). A lack of bridging social capital may cut off access to alternative role models and norms of behavior. This situation may create a contagion effect in which maladaptive norms of behavior are spread more easily, especially among children and youth. If detrimental neighborhood conditions are particularly harsh, they are considered to reach an epidemic threshold level in which there is a virtual absence of any positive role models or exposure to social groups outside of the neighborhood (Crane, 1991). If only a small proportion of an individual's social group are unemployed or have low educational attainment, there is likely to be little impact because the individual can still find other social

contacts or role models (Crane, 1991; Vartanian & Gleason, 1999). However, as poor neighborhoods become increasingly socially isolated from prosocial role models, residents can be more susceptible to negative peer influences. A lack in bridging social capital may exacerbate this situation by further isolating residents from contacts who can serve as positive role models.

For instance, Wilson (1987) theorizes that residents of high-poverty inner-city areas may rarely have contact with people who have steady jobs, higher education or who are not receiving public assistance and there is some evidence to suggest that residents of poor neighborhoods are socially isolated from these mainstream social networks. Rankin and Quane (2000) found that African Americans in the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago tended to have social networks characterized by fewer number of employed friends, fewer friends with a college degree, and more friends who were receiving public assistance than those living in more affluent neighborhoods. Similarly, Tigges, Browne, and Green (1998) found that poor African Americans in Atlanta were less likely than non-poor African Americans and Whites to have friends with a college degree. Wilson (1987, 1996) suggests these types of restricted social networks foster norms of behavior that reinforce the high rates of unemployment and low educational attainment found in poor neighborhoods. With few social contacts who have stable employment or a college education, residents of poor neighborhoods are theorized to be cut off from norms of behavior that support activities such as steady employment or a college education. In addition, contagion processes and social isolation have also been linked to youth outcomes such as teenage childbearing and dropping out of school (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Crane, 1991; South & Baumer, 2000; Vartanian & Gleason, 1999).

Bonding Social Capital

Putnam's (2000) notion of bonding social capital includes exclusive or inward looking social networks that are characterized by strong social cohesion and social support. Bonding social capital is considered beneficial because dense and cohesive social networks are thought to foster reciprocity, solidarity, and support. As an explanation for neighborhood effects, a lack of bonding social capital can be conceived of operating through two mechanisms: (1) problems related to "community social organization" (Sampson et al., 1997), and (2) a general "absence of trust and reciprocity and social support" among neighbors (Kawachi, Kennedy, & Glass, 1999).

Community Social Organization

Putnam's bonding social capital draws on Sampson's concept of community social organization that stresses the importance of social cohesion for the functioning of a community. Sampson et al. (1997) argue that neighborhoods characterized by strong social cohesion and a sense of trust among community members also tend to have a high degree of informal social control and collective efficacy. Sampson et al. (1997) describe informal social control as "mechanisms by which residents themselves achieve public order" (p. 918), which is contrasted with formal social control such as community policing. Informal social control is connected to "the willingness of local residents to intervene for the common good" (Sampson et al., 1997, p. 919). Sampson et al. (1997) provide the following examples of informal social control: "the monitoring of spontaneous playgroups among children, a willingness to intervene to prevent acts such as truancy and street corner 'hanging' by teenage peer groups, and the confrontations of persons who are exploiting or disturbing public space" (Sampson et al., 1997, p. 919). For Sampson and his colleagues, social cohesion, informal social control and collective efficacy represent "social organizational processes" (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999, p. 634), that reflect the level of a community's social organization. Sampson (2001) contends that neighborhoods with a high degree of social capital are also characterized by an ability to "realize common values and maintain social controls that foster public safety" (p. 95). Informal social control, he contends, is best achieved within neighborhoods that possess strong social networks and a sense of shared trust.

Dense informal social networks are often able to control problematic behavior such as delinquency, because of the reactions of network members to help shape prosocial behavior (Sampson & Groves, 1989). In this way, Sampson's community social organization is similar to Coleman's notion of norms and effective sanctions. From this perspective, communities with stronger social networks will be characterized by less deviant behavior. A community that is characterized by a high degree of social cohesion and trust among neighborhood residents (e.g., a high degree of social capital) is considered better able to achieve collective values and maintain social control (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

In addition to the importance of dense informal social networks, participation in formal community organizations is also considered an important method of fostering social cohesion within neighborhoods. Putnam (2000) notes that participation in formal community organizations

can foster norms of reciprocity, cooperation and trust among community members while also helping residents to wield collective power in order to influence decision-making about their neighborhood. Likewise, Coleman also conceived of social capital in the form of appropriable social organizations in which formal networks can be used for a variety of resource sharing activities. Sampson and Groves (1989) note that formal organizations or associations are thought to reflect community solidarity and neighborhoods characterized by strong community organizations or institutions are thought to have a better capacity “to defend [their] local interests” (p. 779), especially in terms of advocating for neighborhood resources. In this sense, formal social networks are thought to represent an important form of social capital because they provide the vehicle for community members to exert their collective influence for the good of the community.

Sampson and his colleagues argue that structural aspects of low-income communities tend to foster informal and formal social networks that are characterized by poor social cohesion, resulting in a lack of informal social control and collective efficacy, which creates community social disorganization. In turn, community social disorganization, as noted in Figure 1, has been linked to certain neighborhood effects, including crime and public disorder (Sampson et al., 1997; Sampson & Groves, 1989), child and youth behavioral problems (Elliot, Wilson, Huizinga, Sampson, Elliot, & Rankin, 1996), child maltreatment (Coulton, Korbin, Su, & Chow, 1995; Ernst, 2001) and adult depression (Ross, 2000).

Trust, Reciprocity and Social Support

In addition to the role of bonding social capital in the development of community social organization, the basic attributes of bonding social capital (including a sense of trust and reciprocity among community members) have also been linked to neighborhood effects. A sense of trust and reciprocity is perhaps the most commonly used definition of social capital. Onyx and Bullen (2000) consider a sense of trust within a social network as involving the expectation that others in the network are mutually supportive. The social capital concept of reciprocity involves a member of the social network acting on behalf of others (even at a personal cost) with the expectation that others will act for her/his benefit at some point in the future (Onyx & Bullen, 2000). This form of social capital is similar to Coleman’s notion of social capital as

obligations and expectations, which consist of shared trust, reciprocity, and fulfillment of obligations.

The social capital concepts of trust and reciprocity are considered important sources of social support. A large body of research suggests that strong social support is associated with improved mental health and health outcomes (Barnett & Gotlib, 1988; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Indeed, social support is considered to contribute to general well-being and to help protect people from health and mental health problems during times of stress or crisis (Cohen & Willis, 1985). As an explanation for neighborhood effects the lack of trust, reciprocity and social support are considered to be associated with the health and mental health problems often found in poor neighborhoods. There is some evidence to suggest that when social capital is operationalized as trust and reciprocity, it is associated with health outcomes as noted in Figure 1 (Kawachi, Kennedy, & Glass, 1999; Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner, & Prothrow-Smith, 1997), and may be associated with mental health (Norman, 2003).

LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

As the previous section illustrated, research suggests that there are links between social capital and neighborhood effects in poor neighborhoods; however, the theory of social capital has certain limitations. The majority of current conceptualizations of social capital fail to capture the context in which social capital is generated (Foley & Edwards, 1999). The ability of social capital to yield resources for a community depends not only on social networks and social processes, but also on the availability of such community attributes as economic capital, political power, and concrete neighborhood resources. A lack of these community attributes can hinder the use of social capital, making it difficult for poor neighborhoods to acquire the same type of benefits and outcomes as more affluent communities (with comparable levels of social capital).

The lack of attention to the ecological context of social capital in poor neighborhoods is an ironic and puzzling omission. Social capital serves as a mediator between neighborhood conditions and individual outcomes, yet the ways in which ecological contexts impact the ability of social capital to provide resources for a neighborhood are rarely considered. Unfortunately, this absence severely limits its ability to explain neighborhood effects. As Warren et al. (2001) note, it also can foster a

“blame the victim” approach that is reminiscent of an out-dated moral deficiency notion of poverty being a result of lazy people who do not want to work. When social capital is not considered within specific contexts, the moral deficiency argument can be replaced by a “social deficit argument” (Warren et al., 2001, p. 2), in other words, “if poor communities just got their social capital ‘act together’ so that they could be more like middle-class communities, then the problems of poverty could be solved” (p. 2). This lack of attention to specific neighborhood contexts suggests that social capital theory has been built off of the notion that White middle-class communities and neighborhoods are the norm through which other communities should be compared.

Foley and Edwards (1999) are perhaps the most prolific on the issue of social capital as a context-dependent construct. They argue that a true understanding of social capital must consider the “social location” (p. 165) in which the social capital is located. They suggest that “the use value of social capital depends on how specific networks are embedded in the broader system of stratification” (Foley & Edwards, 1999, p. 168). Much of the research and theory on the role of social capital in poor neighborhoods ignores this “broader system of stratification,” and makes an assumption that poor neighborhoods have lower levels of social capital than do more affluent neighborhoods. Yet when social capital is grounded within an ecological context, the picture becomes much more complicated. Portes (1998) provides the following apt example of the importance of context for understanding social capital:

Saying for example that student A has social capital because he obtained access to a large tuition loan from his kin and that student B does not because she failed to do so neglects the possibility that [student] B’s kin network is equally or more motivated to come to her aid but simply lacks the means to do so. (Portes, 1998, p. 5)

Clearly, the context in which social capital operates has a significant impact on the types of resources available to members of various types of social networks. When social capital theory is invoked as an explanation of neighborhood effects in poor neighborhoods, these inequities in social conditions must be considered.

In examining the social conditions of poor inner-city communities it is important to acknowledge certain macro-level trends that impact the neighborhood context. For instance, Edwards and Foley (1997) note that macro trends related to economic restructuring in the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as the dismantling of the welfare state

have dramatically changed the American landscape. With respect to economic restructuring, trends related to deindustrialization and globalization have transformed the U.S. economy from a goods-producing to a service-producing economy. This transformation has brought with it widespread closure of manufacturing plants, especially in central city areas and these changes have resulted in huge losses of living-wage unionized manufacturing jobs for central city residents (Wilson, 1996; Massey & Fischer, 2000). The negative effects of these trends have been concentrated on urban communities of color (Wilson, 1987, 1996). Additionally, the gradual dismantling of the welfare state has also affected neighborhood contexts. Edwards and Foley (1997) note a general reduction of government involvement in social services and safety net programs, as well as the increasing devolution of federal responsibility of safety net programs to state governments. These changes have resulted in fewer resources being directed toward social welfare programs within poor neighborhoods. For instance, between 1965 and 1975, total social welfare expenditures grew by approximately 65%; yet between 1975 and 1995, total social welfare expenditures grew by only 15% (Social Security Administration, 1999, as cited in Infoplease, 2004), suggesting a gradual decline in government investment in public social welfare.

In addition, the increasing racial/ethnic segregation of poor neighborhoods also represents an important macro trend that affects neighborhood context. Wilson (1996) notes that redlining practices by the Federal Housing Administration's mortgage program during the 1940s and the 1950s made it difficult for urban inner-city neighborhoods to attract homebuyers. These trends prompted middle-class Whites to move to the suburbs, leaving many Blacks in the urban areas of cities. The racial/ethnic segregation that often characterizes poor inner-city communities has important effects on the context of neighborhoods. Massey and Fischer (2000) have found that racial/ethnic segregation serves to further concentrate poverty in certain communities. The additional concentration of poverty that accompanies racial/ethnic segregation can then accentuate neighborhood effects.

These macro trends have greatly affected the ecological context of poor neighborhoods. Economic restructuring has reduced the availability of living-wage work in the central city and decreased overall economic development in these neighborhoods. Reductions in welfare expenditures and the dismantling of safety net programs have reduced critical neighborhood resources in poor communities including access to health, mental health, education, and employment services.

And increased racial/ethnic segregation increased the concentration of poverty, thus accentuating the negative effects of high-poverty neighborhoods. These conditions all serve to disenfranchise the residents of poor neighborhoods, reduce their political power and access to community decision-making.

Without adequate attention to the ecology of these macro trends and their impact on poor communities, discussions of social capital advertently or inadvertently imply that all poor neighborhoods are deficient in social capital. For example, there is little systematic evidence that poor neighborhoods have less social capital than more affluent neighborhoods. The notion that neighborhood effects are a result of low levels of social capital in poverty-stricken neighborhoods is overly simplistic. Although some research has found lower levels of social networks in poor communities (Tigges et al., 1998), there is by no means a consensus on this issue. For instance, Rankin and Quane (2000) found that African American families living in the poorest neighborhoods of Chicago were actually more likely than residents of other neighborhoods to be members of community organizations. Similarly, in Portney and Berry's (1997) investigation into the political participation of minority communities in five cities, survey results revealed that residents of poor African American neighborhoods participated in neighborhood associations and city politics at high levels. Moreover, participation rates of residents of poor African American neighborhoods were almost twice as high as participation rates of residents of poor non-minority neighborhoods.

Instead of deficient social networks and social processes in poor neighborhoods, Cohen (2001) suggests that the ways in which social capital is used in poor neighborhoods may be qualitatively different from the ways in which it is used in more affluent communities and that these differences result in divergent types of resources. She notes that residents of poor neighborhoods may use social capital to help acquire basic necessities such as food, shelter, or income. As such, poor neighborhoods may in fact have plenty of social capital, but the types of resources that result from this social capital are different than the resources one would expect in more affluent communities. Instead of a college education or a job, the social capital of poor neighborhoods may yield much more concrete resources that assist in day-to-day functioning and survival within neighborhoods that are depleted of important resources. Warren et al. (2001) note: "the main problem for poor communities may not be a relative deficit in social capital, but that their social assets have greater obstacles to overcome, and are constantly under assault" (p. 4). The concepts of social capital are based on White middle-class

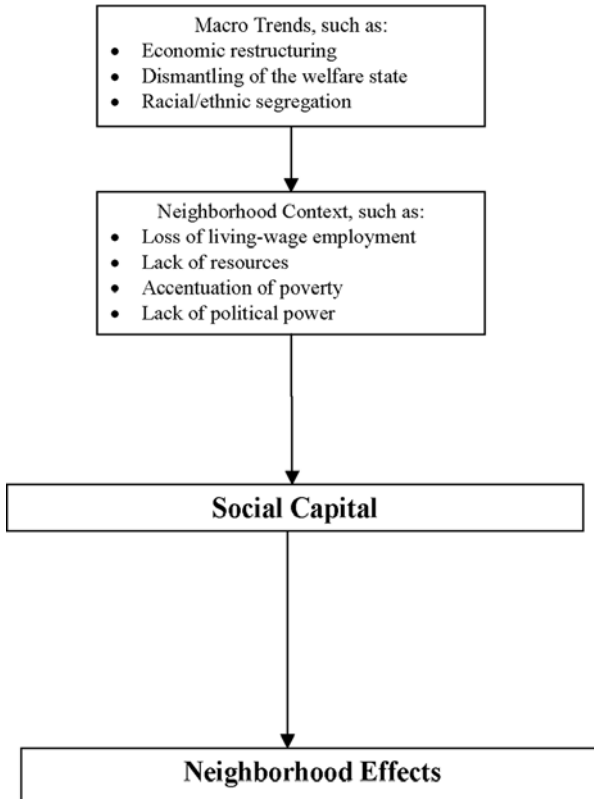
assumptions that can restrict our understanding of the resources and the benefits emerging from networks. Such conceptualizations do not consider the ecological realities and social context of life in poor neighborhoods.

For instance, in Altschuler, Somkin, and Adler's (2004) qualitative study of social capital in both high and low socioeconomic status neighborhoods in one large California city, results revealed that social capital was alive and well in poor neighborhoods, but that obstacles related to neighborhood context prevented residents from attaining the same kinds of benefits and resources that residents of more affluent neighborhoods were able to obtain. For instance, residents of both poor and more affluent neighborhoods often mobilized into socially cohesive groups in order to work together to address community problems, yet the issues they faced were quite different. Residents of poor neighborhoods tended to mobilize to address chronic threats such as crime or public disorder, whereas residents of more affluent neighborhoods mobilized to address such discrete and less urgent threats as "a proposed Starbucks opening in their neighborhood" (p. 1227). These findings suggest that in poor neighborhoods, social capital tended to act as a tool for securing concrete resources; whereas in more affluent communities, where concrete resources were in plentiful supply, it operated as a tool for mobilizing neighborhood preferences.

TOWARD AN ECOLOGICALLY-GROUNDED MODEL FOR UNDERSTANDING HIGH-POVERTY NEIGHBORHOODS

In order to address the current limitations of social capital theory, Figure 2 presents an ecologically-grounded model of social capital that captures the context-dependent nature of social capital. This model is partially based on a conceptual model of social capital and community health put forth by James et al. (2001), however, this ecologically-grounded model of social capital extends beyond community health and is applicable to all neighborhood effects. At the top of the model are macro trends, such as economic restructuring, dismantling of the welfare state, and increased racial/ethnic segregation. These macro trends are posited as factors that contribute to the neighborhood context of poor communities (second box). The neighborhood context of poor communities is often characterized by a lack of living-wage employment, a lack of resources (such as health, education, and employment

FIGURE 2. Ecologically-Grounded Model of Social Capital as an Explanation of Neighborhood Effects in Poor Communities



services), an increased concentration of poverty that often accompanies racial/ethnic segregation and a lack of political power. Neighborhood context is directly linked to social capital.

When social capital explanations for neighborhood effects fail to adequately account for the ecological context of social capital, the gaps in our understanding of neighborhood effects become obvious. For instance, in the case of bridging social capital as an explanation for unemployment, macro trends and neighborhood context may be of critical importance. If residents of poor communities have not had access to quality public education in their neighborhood or do not have the financial capital needed to attend college, addressing weak ties and structural

holes may be of little value in helping them to obtain a job. Similarly, if macro trends have contributed to the loss of employment opportunities within poor urban neighborhoods (even if bridging social capital is prevalent), it may not be a source of job information because the jobs are not available. Moreover, neighborhood context and availability of resources is also likely to affect the types of resources that might result from trust and reciprocity. For instance, even if trust and reciprocity produce social support, the ability of this social support to help buffer residents of poor communities from health and mental health problems may be limited if these residents do not have health insurance or access to affordable health care in their neighborhoods.

An important feature of the ecologically-grounded model of social capital is that it does not assume that social capital is necessarily always a positive attribute. Although Putman's (2000) conceptualization of social capital is largely positive, he does acknowledge that social capital can have a "dark side" in which dense social networks are used to realize goals that do not contribute to a civil society. Portes (1996) also describes the "downside of social capital," and notes that in addition to public goods, social capital can yield "public bads" (p. 20). He describes mafia families, prostitution rings, and youth gangs as examples of social networks that may yield substantial social capital for their members, yet obviously do not contribute to community well-being.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

An ecologically-grounded model of social capital has important implications for social work practice, policy, and education. In terms of theory for practice, such a model of social capital suggests that discrete efforts to increase social networks or participation in community organizations among residents of poor neighborhoods will have little impact if attention is not given to the availability of other resources within the neighborhood context. For instance, Gittell and Vidal (1998) describe building social capital as a strategy within the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) national demonstration project, which used a consensus organizing approach to community organizing. DeFilippis (2001) points out that Gittell and Vidal perceived the 10-year operation of the LISC pilot site as a success because the project had: (1) created 17 new community development corporations, (2) sustained resident volunteer commitment, and (3) garnered increased support from the larger community within the metropolitan area. Yet, Gittell and Vidal also state

that there was “limited physical and economic improvement” (p. 4) in the area. DeFilippis is correct when he questions whether the LISC project was successful in promoting social capital if there were few tangible neighborhood improvements. Increasing the number of community organizations in a neighborhood or increasing residents’ involvement in community organizations may represent one necessary, but not sufficient, component of social capital development in poor communities. Indeed, in addition to fostering social networks and social processes in poor neighborhoods, practitioners seeking to foster social capital should also focus on increasing the quantity and quality of neighborhood resources and opportunities. For instance, Cohen (2001) suggests that “intervening institutions” (p. 267) are needed to leverage and convert social capital in poor neighborhoods into tangible resources. Intervening institutions consist of community resources and organizations, such as community development programs, or comprehensive community initiatives such as the Empowerment Zones/Enterprise Community Initiative. Cohen (2001) notes that in order for such community-wide resources to be effective in converting existing social capital in poor communities into actual resources, they need to build off the existing community infrastructures, address relevant demographic changes in the community, and also not be limited to government programs.

An ecologically-grounded model of social capital may have important implications for neighborhood social and economic policies. For instance, policies that seek to address the ways in which macro-level factors negatively impact poor neighborhoods may help to improve neighborhood conditions and thereby allow social capital in these neighborhoods to actually produce beneficial resources. Real economic development policies that actually bring living-wage work into poor inner-city neighborhoods could have a tremendous impact on the use and value of social capital in these communities. Targeted policies that seek to improve neighborhood conditions may also increase the usefulness of social capital in poor communities. An infusion of resources and social welfare services in these communities may help to improve the ability of social capital to yield beneficial resources for poor neighborhoods.

The ecologically-grounded model of social capital also has important implications for social work education. The social work profession is founded on ecological tenets and is expressly interested in interactions between people and their environments. Courses in Human Behavior in the Social Environment can use the ecologically-grounded model of social capital as a way to illustrate the importance of context in understanding human behavior, as well as an illustration of the need to

continually question the underlying assumptions of popular social science theories.

The impact of neighborhood-level poverty on the health and well-being of individuals, families, and communities is of vital importance to the social work profession. As theory and research on the connection between neighborhood-level poverty and outcomes for residents continues to expand, the identification of mechanisms through which neighborhoods experience social problems is becoming more and more critical. The co-occurrence of neighborhood-level socioeconomic disadvantage with a wide range of social problems is an urgent issue. Although social capital theory provides an explanation of some neighborhood effects, the limitations of the theory suggests that a unified theory of neighborhood effects in poor communities is needed. The ecologically-grounded model of social capital, proposed in this paper, can serve as a model for improving our understanding of the complex relationship between poverty, people, and places.

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