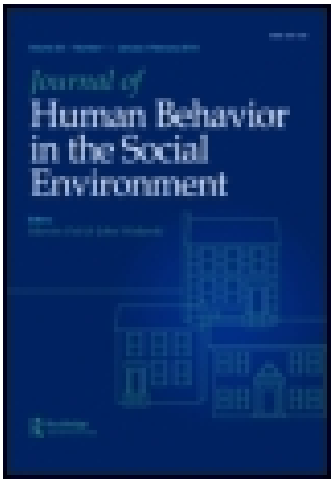
This article was downloaded by: [New York University]
On: 06 January 2015, At: 12:54
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/whum20

Fickle Families and the Kindness of Strangers: Social Capital in the Lives of Low-Income Single Mothers

Robert L. Hawkins [a]

[a] Silver School of Social Work, New York University , New York, New York

Published online: 05 Feb 2010.

To cite this article: Robert L. Hawkins (2010) Fickle Families and the Kindness of Strangers: Social Capital in the Lives of Low-Income Single Mothers, Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 20:1, 38-55, DOI: 10.1080/10911350903183263

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10911350903183263

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 20:38–55, 2010
Copyright © Taylor & Francis Group, LLC
ISSN: 1091-1359 print/1540-3556 online
DOI: 10.1080/10911350903183263

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Fickle Families and the Kindness of Strangers: Social Capital in the Lives of Low-Income Single Mothers

ROBERT L. HAWKINS
Silver School of Social Work, New York University, New York, New York

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

This article is a qualitative study that examines the social capital in the lives of 20 formerly homeless and nearly homeless single mothers with children in their care. The findings for this study indicate that the mothers' close social ties simultaneously served as a resource and a hindrance to their progress into sustainable work or education. Findings also show that nearly all of the women in this study benefited from "weak" ties by receiving information or other kinds of resources from strangers or friends of friends. Implications for policy and practice are also discussed.

KEYWORDS Social capital, single mothers, social networks, poverty, welfare, homeless

Past research on the social networks and social support of minority families has emphasized the positive and helpful nature of familial and kin relationships. The benefit of close ties to extended family, real, and fictive kin has been illustrated in previous work by notable experts such as Dilworth-Anderson and Marshall (1996); Franklin and Moss (2000); Greene (1999); McAdoo (1998); and Vega, Kolody, Valle, and Weir (1991). This past research has focused on the positive elements that kin ties can provide, contending that these relationships are not only helpful but essential to many minority communities, especially African-American and Latino families. More recently, however, greater attention has been paid to the underside of kin relation-

Preliminary findings from this study were presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, Philadelphia, PA, August 2005. This project was originally funded by support from the Robinhood Foundation with research assistance from Elana Needle, MA.

Address correspondence to Robert L. Hawkins, Silver School of Social Work, New York University, 1 Washington Square North, New York, NY 10012, USA. E-mail: rlh6@nyu.edu

ships, especially for low-income minority families, suggesting that the role, benefit, and usefulness of close social ties might be more complex than previously observed.

Using a social capital lens, this article examines the positive and negative social relationships that low-income minority mothers hold. It examines the social capital in the lives of these women and the complexity of their relationships, focusing on the relative strength and role of these relationships, and examining new or indirect relationships compared to familial or kinship connections. This article builds on previous research by examining the effect of social capital on helping low-income single mothers move from extreme poverty into work or education.

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

SOCIAL CAPITAL AS A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Several authors argue that despite years of trying to define and conceptualize social capital, the concept is still unclear (Pooley, Cohen, & Pike, 2004; Portes, 1998; Roberts, 2004; and Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Despite this, the concept of social capital has intrigued scholars in disciplines ranging from sociology to economics to psychology to public health (Lin, 2001; Pooley; Roberts).

Social capital has been described alternatively as "glue" (Pooley et al., 2004; Putnam, 2000) and as a "web" (Coleman, 1988; Veenstra, 2000) that holds individuals and groups together in a community through reciprocal and cooperative relationships. In this article, I borrow from the perspective of Portes (2000) and Kawachi, (1999). Portes contends that social capital has two meanings: one from an individual perspective and the other from a community standpoint. Portes builds on the influential framing of Coleman (1988, 1990) who defines social capital as a by-product of social connections, the set of personal relationships that exist within a community, both inside and outside of the family. Kawachi (1999) sees the concept more broadly but defines it as an individual resource that is derived from membership within community networks.

The research literature describes how social capital functions in several ways. Most often, social capital is defined as having direct or indirect resources within your family or friend network or the neighborhood (Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Whitley & McKenzie, 2005). Whether it functions as a direct or indirect resource, social capital is often perceived as a positive factor in people's lives. The positive role that social capital can play in the lives of individuals is supported in the literature (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997; Martin, Rogers, Cook, & Joseph, 2004; Putnam, 2000).

Both qualitative and quantitative studies have found that social capital in the form of a supportive social network can be important to surviving a number of personal, emotional, and economic hardships (Bassuk, Mickelson,

Bissell, & Perloff, 2002; Edin & Lein, 1997; Jarrett, 1994; Schein, 1995; Werner & Smith, 1992). Others, however, have found that there are negative and counterproductive sides to social capital as well; social networks can be time-consuming or hurtful to mental health function or create difficulty in acquiring or retaining a job (Antonucci, Akiyama, & Lansford, 1998; Caughy, O'Campo & Muntaner, 2003; Dominguez & Watkins, 2003).

Some researchers have taken a closer look at quality and kinds of social capital that exist. Gitell (1998) and Szreter and Woolcock (2004), for example, have discussed the differences between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding social capital refers to relationships among members of a group or network who see themselves as similar. Bridging social capital refers to relationships among people and groups of people who perceive themselves to be dissimilar in some demonstrable fashion such as age, socioeconomic status, race-ethnicity, and education (Szreter & Woolcock). The extent to which individuals build relationships with the institutions and individuals who have relative power over them (e.g., to provide access to services, jobs, or other resources) is referred to as linking social capital (Szreter & Woolcock; Woolcock, 2001).

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES: A LOOK AT THE LITERATURE

Social capital has been studied using data from various types of community settings, with many researchers examining the level of social support in ethnic and low-income communities and others looking specifically at social capital as a by-product of a social support network. The approach to studying social capital has evolved over the past 30 years, from an intangible concept to an element that is essential for positive human development and functioning (Putnam, 2000; Lin, 2001). Social capital has been viewed in almost always positive terms, a resource that may grow (in the case of middle-class white families) or decline (in the case of low-income black families) but remains qualitatively the same (Putnam, 2000; Dominguez & Watkins, 2003). How we think about and conceptualize social capital has begun to change from something that is always positive to something that has both positive and negative elements.

Carol Stack (1974) offered a pioneering study of mutual support in low-income African-American families in her classic book, *All My Kin*. This qualitative study found that kin and fictive kin relationships supported each other and offered help including babysitting, transportation, money lending, and emotional support. Other studies report similar findings, such as Franklin and Moss (2000), Hachett and Jackson (1993), Dilworth-Anderson (1992), and McAdoo (1998). All of these studies regard African-Americans, especially low-income African-Americans, as relying heavily on extended family and

informal modes of support. These findings are not restricted to the African-American population; Latinos, Asian-Americans, and other groups were also noted for having high levels of kin support (Green, 1999; Vega et al., 1991).

Studies of social capital found that members of minority groups relied a great deal on mutual support and the assistance of fictive kin. Related research found that the size of the support network may not be as important as who is in the network and what resources they provide. The types of resources within a network can vary by race. Several studies, for instance, suggest that whites have an advantage in social capital over their minority counterparts, especially among single-mother–led households (Benin & Keith, 1995; Hofferth, 1984; Hogan, Hao, & Parish, 1990; Jarrett, 1994; Lin 2001). Similarly, Hofferth found that black single-mother households were less likely to receive financial assistance from their families, and they benefited less from their kin networks than households headed by white females. Likewise, Benin and Keith (1995) observed that African-American and Anglo mothers received various forms of support from relatives and family members but that Anglo mothers receive more help than African-American mothers. Further, using data from the 1980 wave of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, Boisjoly, Duncan, and Hofferth (1995) examined the resources and forms of support in 3,311 African-American and white families and found that race makes a difference in who receives social support and under what circumstances. Whites were more likely to receive income support from their kin network than African-Americans. Black families, however, were more likely to receive in-kind support from their friends than were white families.

The role and positive benefits of social capital and related social support have become increasingly clear in the literature. What is also becoming clear is the underside of social capital. Studies have found negative effects of social capital as well. Having too many social connections or having the wrong kind of social capital can actually hurt an individual (Antonucci et al., 1998; Caughy et al., 2003; Roschelle, 1997; Rubio, 1997). Although Stack (1974) emphasized mutual support among low-income minority women, she also pointed out that the support system was limited as it operated only within an isolated community; it helped families survive in poverty but never moved them up out of it. Caughy et al. (2003) observe that high levels of social capital in very-low-income communities are associated with behavioral problems in preschoolers. Sloan, Jason, and Addlesperger (1996) found that among low-income, inner-city Mexican-American and African-American families, social networks increased stress and lowered self-esteem, life satisfaction, and occurrence of positive life events. The research documents gender differences in social support as well. In their review of the literature, Kawachi and Berkman (2001) found that social connections increase levels of mental illness symptoms in women with low resources. Bassuk et al. (2002) write that the differences found in social capital are

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

due in large part to poverty. In their research on low-income heads of households, they found that low-income women received more emotional support from professionals and friends but less from family members. They also found conflict, often a predictor of negative mental health outcomes, to be greatest among family members and partners.

In short, the data show that social connections can have negative and positive results. These conclusions could represent the changing nature of kin and friend connections or a tendency for earlier researchers to ignore the downside of ethnicity and social networks (Bassuk et al., 2002; Roschelle, 1997). Roschelle argues that the interpretation of earlier studies on social support networks may have been overstated. Further, she points out that because of the increases in poverty rates, violence, housing shortages, and other critical components in ethnic minority neighborhoods, the informal social support systems typically found in ethnic communities have deteriorated.

Roschelle's research is consistent with that of Wilson (1987, 1996), who explains the differences in community resources and social capital between whites and non-whites as the results of a disappearing middle class. As real wages decline and working-class and middle-class jobs move to the suburbs, low-income inner-city residents, particularly those in non-white communities, face a dwindling middle-class population who followed the jobs to the suburbs. This migration of the middle class leaves a low-income minority population with a diminished social network.

Not only has this change in kin support occurred among African-Americans but, as Roschelle points out, it is seen among Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans. Menjívar (2000) found similar structural and economic barriers to reciprocity and support networks among Salvadoran immigrants. For all of these groups, the structural and economic changes left behind higher crime, more drugs, fewer positive resources, and negative social capital that vastly outweighs positive social capital.

As there is less positive social capital to go around, the literature reports that low-income mothers can quickly "use up" the social capital available to them. Further, when that source of kin and fictive kin relationships is exhausted or strained, low-income mothers turn to the service industry (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003; Menjivar, 1997, 2000; Toohey, Shinn, & Weitzman, 2004). This approach is especially common among very-low-income individuals, such as homeless mothers. Specifically, studies note that homeless families have often strained their kin and friend relationships owing to past over-reliance on these individuals (Rossi, Wright, Fisher, & Willis, 1987; Shinn & Weitzman, 1996; Toohey et al.). As a result, many of these families find emotional and moral support among service professionals. Dominguez and Watkins found in their qualitative study of African-American and Latina mothers that though some women rely on family and kin support, many replace their familial relationships with institution-based support networks

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

that provide them with childcare, financial, and emotional support. These relationships, by their very nature, are less stressful and are free of the responsibilities of reciprocity.

CURRENT STUDY

This current study is a qualitative, exploratory study that examines negative and positive social capital among family members, friends, and strangers in the lives of low-income single mothers who had either left welfare or who were on a clear trajectory to leave welfare before time limits forced them off. This study uses data from a longitudinal study of psychological, social, and educational factors in the lives of low-income single mothers and their children. It examines the quality of social capital among these low-income single mothers, considering the quantity of social capital and how the women use it. Specifically, this study looks at the connections that these women develop and attempts to uncover how the women understand and use these connections. The study questions whether the obvious connections in a mother's life are actually the strongest sources of social capital. In addition, the study attempts to identify the social capital factors that most help women decide to seek further education.

Study Participants

The mothers in this study were all homeless or nearly homeless as recently as 5 years prior to the initial interview. They were also currently receiving welfare or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits at the time of the interview or had been receiving benefits within the past 3 years. All participants lived in a Northeastern metropolitan area at the time of the interview and most were enrolled in a life-enhancement program. Most of the women were recruited for the study through site coordinators of the homeless shelters where they lived temporarily; the others were recruited using a snowball method. Interviews took place in the participant's home or in a place of her choosing that was conducive both to privacy and tape recording. Each interview lasted 2 to 3 hours; follow-up interviews were conducted with some participants when questions of consistency and accuracy were raised. The mothers volunteered for the study and were not paid for their participation.

Participants in this study include formerly homeless and nearly homeless mothers with children in their care. The women range in age from 23 to 46, with an average age of 34 ($N = 20$). All participants were mothers with children ranging in age from 1 year to adulthood; the average number of children was two. Seven mothers were white or European-American, whereas seven were Latina and five African-American. All participants were single mothers

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

(divorced, separated, widowed, or never married) and receiving TANF or other public assistance.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were coded for social capital variables based on the current literature using Nvivo qualitative software. During the coding process, data were categorized, connections between categories were identified, concepts and categories were combined or dropped, and sub-categories were created.

The initial data collection process was exploratory, so a grounded-theory approach was originally employed (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to derive meaning from the mothers' experiences and better understand and build upon their perceptions of their own lives. Data were collected by the author and advanced graduate students through semi-structured, qualitative interviews and included interview guides and participant observation. The semi-structured interview questionnaire was developed to collect life history data from participants within a format suggested by Seidman (1994). Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The analysis of data consisted of multiple coders independently reading the verbatim transcripts and then agreeing on, developing, and implementing a systematic coding scheme for the data. In reading transcripts, coding techniques included a relational method of analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998) as a way of becoming sensitized to the individual, familial, and socio-structural narratives of each of the participants. Transcripts were then analyzed for preliminary themes using an open-coding process (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & McCormack, 1991; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process was followed by axial coding, a data reduction process whereby connections between categories were identified, concepts and categories were combined or dropped, and sub-categories were created. Finally, the conceptual framework was developed using constant comparisons (Ely et al., 1991; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the reporting of the findings, all study participants names have been changed.

Further analysis included a focused examination of the social capital in the participants' lives by conducting a qualitative social network analysis through eco-mapping. Social network analysis examines how the structure, strength of ties, and roles within social relationships influences actions (Hersberger, 2003; Oliker, 2000). Similarly, eco-maps are a tool often used by social workers to graphically display the relationships among individuals and their social support system, their community, and agencies involved in their lives (Poulin, 2005). It is based on the social work person-in-environment concept (Hartman, 1995) and evaluates positive and negative relationships.

As a way to examine the social network, an eco-map was developed for each participant. Eco-maps analyzed the strength of the various relationships and also permitted researchers to better understand the value of each

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

individual social tie in helping the participant move toward housing, work, or an educational program. Unlike traditional eco-maps, these models were developed based on data taken from the semi-structured interviews, rather than in conjunction with the participants (Poulin, 2005).

Findings

The findings for this study indicate that the social capital provided by families and friends can be complex and can be as hurtful as it is helpful. Other findings indicate that strangers or those with whom the mothers held loose ties at times provided greater support and help than family or friends. These findings suggest that for this sample, parents, siblings, friends, and neighbors who are involved in the lives of low-income mothers can simultaneously serve as a resource and a hindrance to their progress into sustainable work or education. Findings also show that nearly all the women in this study benefited in different manners from their "weak" ties by receiving information or other kinds of resources from strangers or from friends of friends.

As in earlier studies, low-income women's social network was relatively small (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003; Hersberger, 2003). There was, however, the existence of social support. The women in this study received support through social connections that could produce social capital from three groups: (1) family members, (2) friends or "fictive" kin, and (3) strangers or weak ties. These three groups provided social capital for women in this study that served a functional day-to-day purpose, such as child care and transportation; access to information, such as leads to potential employment; education or services for themselves or their children; and an emotional or psychological purpose, such as someone to whom to tell their problems.

Two additional important themes emerged from this study. One represented a less positive side to social capital. Often their social networks or the networks of their children provided benefits but also took a toll, often distracting the women from focusing on their productive goals or by adding a layer of danger, pressure, or responsibility to their lives. Often the social network consisted of drug dealers, substance abusers, or physically and emotionally abusive or disruptive friends or family members, who provided a form of assistance but were less than helpful because they were dealing with their own personal issues. Lisa, for example, was forced out of her house and moved in with a friend. The friend offered Lisa and her son a temporary place to stay but, because of her own problems and the crowdedness of the house, this "solution" took its toll on Lisa and her son. As she explains:

> It was a very bad situation down there. They were going through a divorce. They were physically abusive to each other. It was just a horrible situation, but we had no where else to go . . . there was drug use, there was alcohol use . . . I mean everything was just falling apart around us

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

> and so the anger issues were coming up and then we started fighting with each other a lot. And she started to get really abusive to her daughters and I by now had already lost another job, I had picked up another job, lost another job, because I became unemployable really. And then one day I was just driving home with my son to a friend's and he said "Where we gonna go mama, where we going?" and I said, "We're going home" and he said, "Mama, I don't feel safe there."

Lisa's story reflects the experience of several women in this study. Keila points out, for example, sometimes family members resent the women they have taken in and then directly or indirectly mistreat them. Keila, who is Latina and who was kicked out of her parent's home when it was discovered that she was pregnant by her African-American boyfriend at age 16, describes life living with her aunt and uncle:

> Since I got pregnant, my aunt's mission was to show me that I made a mistake and that things should be hard for me. She would cook enough for her family, and I would have to cook at nine o'clock when I got home (from school). If I craved a certain food she would make it, but tell me that I could not have any. Her husband would make jokes about African Americans and tell me how stupid I was to fall (for one) ... One evening after a long day she suggested that I wash her feet. When I protested she stated that I should wash her feet and drink the water after to show her some gratitude for allowing me to stay there ... she decided to turn off her telephone so I could not speak to anyone ... She also turned off the heat and took the blanket out of my room and left me only with sheets.

Though no one else in the study describes such an extreme situation, Keila's experiences demonstrate how frustrations are sometimes played out. Carla's experiences were not as negative as Keila's. A mother with two small children escaping an abusive relationship, Carla relied on her friends to provide a place to stay. "I just was bouncing from friend's house to friend's house, and eventually you can only stay in one place for so much time," Carla explained.

Children, Child Care, and Social Connections

Nowhere did the participation of unreliable, dangerous, or weak connections play out more clearly than when it came to children and child care. As do middle-income families, parents in this study made many of these decisions based on trying to meet their children's needs. The birth of a child was often the impetus for seeking help from the welfare system, but those resources were not always available. All women in the study accepted help from someone within their social network to provide backup care for their children when vouchers, public assistance, and other day care options were not

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

available. For some, the social network was a first step; for others, it was a last resort. Susan felt that her mother was critical in helping raise her daughter, especially while she was in substance abuse treatment. Megan, who grew up in a middle-class family, relied almost exclusively on her parents to support her and her daughter.

> It's plain and simple. There is no way that I could have made it without my parents. When I came back home (after leaving an abusive relationship and giving birth to her daughter) they helped me. They really took over.

Other mothers spoke of grandparents, godparents, and other real and fictive kin who bought school supplies and clothes and paid for basic living expenses. For some women, their families were a saving grace; for others, these close ties created tension or simply were not readily available.

Karen, age 33, had her first child at age 18 and had been homeless on and off since her first pregnancy. She said that her social network was large and supportive and she particularly felt that she benefited from one close friend:

> She took me and my kids in. I lived with her for a month and a half. I mean no money, no food stamps, no nothing. I mean she took care of me and my three kids on her and her old man's income, which was not a lot.

When mothers could not go to the welfare system, they often relied upon a potentially dangerous or unreliable source such as a boyfriend, ex-boyfriend, or ex-husband. In most cases, women in this study who had experienced domestic violence still had to depend on the social connections of their ex- and sometimes current batterers.

Having no better choices, some women left their children with the men in their lives, men who had not abused the kids themselves but had battered the mothers. Others left their children with relatives who were emotionally unstable or were drug dealers or users. These mothers felt fortunate that those child care relationships were temporary.

Karen, who had earlier described her children's father as "unstable," later needed him to watch her children while she worked in a retail establishment and lived in a budget hotel:

"When I was in the hotel my kids father would stay with the kids. . . . I had him keeping the kids sometimes on my days at work, 'cause I was working from . . . 10 to 7."

The Kindness of Strangers

Perhaps the most compelling finding from this study is that the most useful social capital may not actually come from friends and family but from

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

"strangers" or people with whom the mothers did not have a prior or long-standing relationship. What close networks could not or would not provide, the mothers in these studies found elsewhere. Mothers who lacked strong or reliable social networks of their own would identify someone outside of her network to help. Many mothers in the study relied on teachers, professors, and even complete strangers. Laura described begging an apartment owner she had met just one day earlier to help her after she ran away from a boyfriend who was threatening to kill her and her children.

> I called them ... crying hysterically. Please try to help me! Try to get me an apartment or whatever! I am an abusive woman! I'm scared and I have three children and I need to leave this house and I have nowhere to go.

Although this action did not get her housing immediately, the apartment owner did call the police, who placed Laura and her children in a shelter. Though Laura acted out of desperation, Susan's actions seemed more calculated; she carefully identified the person who could help her most. Susan is an African-American woman in her mid-thirties and self-described "former crack-addict." Even in the midst of her own substance abuse, she sought help from the person she perceived to be most in charge.

> I was getting high one day and every dope head has a dream and that dream is to have as much dope as they can. And not to hustle just to be able to kick back and even focus on other things other than drugs. That dream came true for me ... I met a guy when I was in a crack house, and he came in to supply and saw me ... I realized he was the man. Anybody with brains no matter how burnt up they were, would say "that would be the person to speak to."

Susan stayed at his apartment for several days where she showered, engaged in a minor drug binge, and ate healthy food for the first time in weeks. The dealer convinced her to return home to her daughter, seek substance abuse treatment, and get an education. She did all three and never saw the man again.

Women also turned to service providers, who were not necessarily strangers but who were their case manager, social workers, group leader. Though service providers were responsible for introducing their clients to available community resources, some took on additional roles in the lives of the single mothers in this study.

For instance, Karen had been moving her two daughters from city-provided hotel to city-provided hotel and came to rely on the help of a worker at an agency. She explained that the worker just seemed to like her personally and they became friends. "She was so good you know. She kind of helped me out as far as getting motivated."

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

Keila, too, felt that she had only one friend, her social worker. "All I had left was Doris. There was nobody left around me to support me, to understand my situation, and to encourage me that things were going to work out, except her. She really is my best friend."

After leaving her abusive husband, Erica participated in family programs at the domestic violence shelter she stayed in. Though she made connections with other women in the program, the person who really befriended her was a parent aide at the shelter. The aide noticed that Erica was gaining weight, sleeping late, showing sounds of physical weakness, and only passively participating in the group's programs. Others thought it was simply depression, but the aide thought that it was much more complicated than that.

> I became sick with auto-immune disorders, myasthenia gravis, fibromyalgia, and a swelling disorder ... I had no one, absolutely no one and I met [parent aide] and she took me to so many different doctors' visits till I got diagnosed, and helped me out enormously. I still consider her a good friend. And she's still a very good friend.

The observation that low-income women sometimes replace their personal or family social network with service providers has been identified in other research (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003). And similar to other studies, it is not clear whether the relationships were reciprocal, whether the service providers began to see the clients as friends, or whether the providers thought that they were simply doing their jobs.

It is important, however to remember that even among service providers, not all experiences of social capital were positive. Though some case managers, for example, went beyond service provision to extend friendship and compassion to their clients, others provided negative experiences. For instance, Ruth, felt mistreated by her case workers. "They treat you like you stole something. Like you lying ... So there's a lot of proving all the way along that I was homeless, that I was an addict."

DISCUSSION

This current research reflects Granovetter's (1974, 1983) pioneering work on the strength of weak ties. Granovetter reasons that those with whom we have the weakest ties are those who can help us most economically. The current research suggests that families, friends, service providers, and strangers offer different types of social network experiences—both negative and positive experiences.

Even positive social capital has its limits, this study found. Traditional families and friends sometimes provide money, housing, employment information that help these single mothers become stronger and more stable.

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

However, these "resources" could come at a cost or could turn out not to be assets at all.

How Family and Friends Offers Both Help and Hurt

Family members and friends provided single mothers in this study with four kinds of social connections:

1. *Practical encouragement/help*: This is the type of support seen most often in studies of social connections and social capital. It includes child care, transportation, food, emergency help, accommodations, and going with the mothers to medical and social service appointments.
2. *Discouragement*: Families and friends discourage mothers from making any positive changes. This discouragement may not always appear malicious or even purposeful. It often comes from boyfriends or a child's fathers but sometimes comes from close female friends, siblings, or parents.
3. *Increased responsibility or pressure*: Some single mothers said that their social networks increased their responsibility or increased pressure on them. In addition to standard reciprocity, social connections sometimes increased the mothers' physical and emotional burdens, psychological stress, and drained their time.
4. *Distraction*: In addition to playing other roles, family and friends could also be a source of distraction for women in this study. Friends and family members who led them to partying, drinking, and other similar activities were especially harmful.

Loose Connections and Service Providers

People with indirect or loose connections to the single mothers also played important roles in their lives. As in other studies, not all encounters with providers or strangers were positive (Seccombe, 1999, 2000; Edin & Lein, 1997). The women in this sample faced stereotyping and stigma from service providers and strangers. Still, the study found a clear pattern of helpfulness from those with loose ties. Altogether, three patterns emerged from these data:

1. *Kindness of strangers*: Often strangers or people that the participants barely knew were best able to provide them with access to needed resources. These individuals were often landlords, shelter workers, or teachers.
2. *Service providers*: Service providers, and in some cases employees, became "friends" of the participants. Even if the service provider did not see the client in this way, the client's perception was that the relationship was in some way equal. Though age, gender, and/or ethnicity might play a role in fostering this perception, it is unclear whether providers feel this connection as well.

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

3. *Rudeness and stigmatizing*: Strangers and service providers often made assumptions about the women in this sample that were not empowering or helpful. Rude behavior ranged from long looks to inappropriate word choices or inappropriate comments that indicated that the women did not deserve service. Sometimes the women were made to feel uncomfortable in a classroom, appearing in front of a judge, or applying for a job.

At the bonding stage, the women in this current research received mixed benefits from their social environment. Szreter and Woolcock (2004) note that those living in poverty often display bonding social capital as a means of maintaining day-to-day existence. As in this sample, the "bonds" exist, but the economic or professional impact of the relationship (e.g., jobs, employment, and education) might be weak. Bridging, too, takes place among the women studied. Some of the mothers have ample experience connecting with others from different socioeconomic and class backgrounds, be they landlords, friends of friends, social workers, or even people in schools and at day care centers.

Linkages often occur with service providers or those who hold some power over the women in the sample. Though the women see themselves as "friends" with the providers, the power dynamic of the relationship is important to linking social capital. The women build linkages to gain access to services but also to obtain educational and economic opportunities to enable them to leave welfare and poverty.

Others have found similar patterns of bonding, bridging, and linking in low-income communities by neighborhood institutions. Small (2006) found neighborhood residents rely on resource "brokers" or " interorganizationally networked neighborhood institutions" (p. 277) to transmit information to parents through a variety of formal and informal means on topics ranging from safety to direct services such as access to health care and from meals to employment.

The process of bonding, bridging, and linking occurs at the individual level in this study, however, and is important to the women's day-to-day lives and long-term goals. Bonding helps the women operate and maintain relationships within their communities and social networks. Though she does not use the term *bonding*, Stack (1974) observed the process of social capital among inner-city families and described community members of similar economic and social assisting one another with daily tasks. Several other studies document this bonding process as well. In the current study, women routinely bond with partners, family members, and other acquaintances to help with daily tasks and living situations. Likewise, bridging social capital can be seen at the community development level, wherein disparate groups work together for a common purpose (Putnam, 2000). In this study, bridging occurs less frequently than bonding; it occurs most often when mothers enter school, take jobs, or enroll in housing shelters.

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

The notion of linking social capital has the greatest effect on women in the sample. The idea that participants benefit most from "strangers" who might have power over them is intriguing, but we should also understand that the *power* might be relative. Consider Susan, for example, and her description of speaking with the drug supplier. Though a drug supplier might not be the "leg up" that we typically envision, Susan's experience indicates that people have varying perceptions of power. Her experience also suggests that linking social capital may require a certain level of self-efficacy on the part of the person in the less powerful position.

The current study holds important implications for practitioners who work with low-income families. Such practitioners tend to assume that the best and most reliable resources come from a client's family members or close friends. Though that may be true for some individuals, however, this study demonstrates the importance of less-obvious sources of social capital, which may actually be the best resources for some. The people who might be the most supportive or helpful may actually be weak ties in a person's life. These findings speak to the importance of social capital not just at the individual or family level but at the community level as well. Practitioners should consider not only individual social capital but resources at the community level, which sometimes make the quickest and biggest difference in a person's life. High-resource communities offer residents access to information, which creates opportunities, which feed back through information channels to create and maintain individual social capital.

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

CONCLUSION

Although limited research has been done on social capital and poverty, some studies show that social capital helps low-income families cope on a day-to-day basis, yet can have a negative side as well (Antonucci et al., 1998; Dominguez & Watkins, 2003). This current study is consistent with that earlier research. Though most mothers in this study maintain contact with family and friends who could be helpful, the social capital from these close ties ranges from very helpful to unreliable to damaging. In addition, women who lose their social capital from families look to non–family members and service providers to provide some kinds of social capital.

REFERENCES

Antonucci, T. C., Akiyama, H., & Lansford, J. E. (1998). Negative effects of close social relations. *Family Relations*, *47*(4), 379–384.

Bassuk, E. L., Mickelson, K. D., Bissell, H. D., & Perloff, J. N. (2002). Role of kin and nonkin support in the mental health of low-income women. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *72*(1), 39–49.

Benin, M., & Keith, V. M. (1995). The social support of employed black and anglo mothers. *Journal of Family Issues, 16*, 275–297.

Bianchi, S. M., & Robinson, J. (1997). What did you do today? Children's use of time, family composition, and the acquisition of social capital. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *59*(2), 332–344.

Boisjoly, J., Duncan, G., & Hofferth, S. (1995). Access to social capital. *Journal of Family Issues*, *16*(5), 609–632.

Brewster, K. L., & Padavic, I. (2002.) No more kin care? Recent change in black mothers' reliance on relative-provided child care. *Gender & Society 16*(4), 546–563.

Briggs, X. S. (1998). Brown kids in white suburbs: Housing mobility and the many faces of social capital, *Housing Policy Debate*, *9*(1), 177–221.

Caughy, M. O., O'Campo, P. J., & Muntaner, C. (2003). When being alone might be better: Neighborhood poverty, social capital, and child mental health. *Social Science Medicine*, *57*, 227–237.

Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology* (Suppl. 94), S95–S120.

Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dilworth-Anderson, P., & Marshall, S. (1996). Social support in its cultural contexts. In G. R. Pierce, B. R. Sarason, & I. G. Sarason (Eds.), *Handbook of social support and the family* (pp. 67–79). New York: Plenum.

Dominguez, S., & Watkins, C. (2003). Creating networks for survival and mobility: Social capital among African-American and Latin-American low-income mothers. *Social Problems*, *50*(1), 111–135.

Ely, M., Anzul, M., Friedman, T., Garner, D., & McCormack, S. A. (1991). *Doing qualitative research*: *Circles within circles*. New York: Falmer Press.

Edin, K., & Lein, L. (1997). *Making ends meet*: *How single mothers survive welfare and low-wage work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Franklin, J. H., & Moss, A. A. (2000). *From slavery to freedom*: *A history of African Americans*. Boston: McGraw-Hill

Granovetter, M. S. (1974). *Getting a Job*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Granovetter, M. S. (1983). The strength of weak ties: A network theory revisited. In R. Collins (Ed.), *Sociological theory* (pp. 201–233). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Green, J. W. (1999) *Cultural awareness in the human services*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Allyn and Bacon.

Gitell, R. V. (1998). *Community organizing*: *Building social capital as a development strategy*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Hartman, A. (1995). Family therapy. In R. L. Edwards (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social work* (19th ed., pp. 983–991). Washington, DC: NASW Press

Hatchett, S., & Jackson, J. (1993). African American extended kin systems. In H. McAdoo (Ed.), *Family ethnicity*: *Strength in diversity* (pp. 90–108). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Hersberger, J. (2003). Are the economically poor information poor? Does the digital divide affect the homeless and access to information? *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, *27*(3), 45–63.

Hofferth, S. L. (1984). Kin networks, race, and family Structure. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *46*, 791–806.

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

Hogan, D. P., Hao, L. X., & Parish, W. L. (1990). Race, kin networks, and assistance to mother-headed families. *Social Forces*, *68*(3), 797–812.

Jarrett, R. L. (1994). Living poor: Family life among single parent, African-American women. *Social Problems*, *41*(1), 30–49.

Kawachi, I. (1999). Social capital and community effects on population and individual health. *Annals of New York Academy of Science*, *896*, 120–130.

Kawachi, I., & Berkman, L. F. (2001). Social ties and mental health. *Journal of Urban Health*: *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, *78*, 458–467.

Kawachi, I., Kennedy, B. P., Lochner, K., & Prothrow-Smith, D. (1997). Social capital, income inequality, and mortality. *American Journal of Public Health*, *87*(9), 1491–1498.

Letiecq, B. L., Anderson, E. A., & Koblinsky, S. A. (1998). Social support of homeless and housed mothers: A comparison of temporary and permanent housing arrangements. *Family Relations*, *47*, 415–421.

Lin, N. (2001). *Social capital*: *A theory of social structure and action*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lindsay, E. W. (1996). Mothers' perceptions of factors influencing the restabilization of homeless families. *Families in Society*, *77*(4), 203–214.

Martin, K. S., Rogers, B. L., Cook, J., & Joseph, H. (2004). Social capital is associated with decreased risk of hunger. *Social Science & Medicine*, *58*, 2645–2654.

Mauthner, N., & Doucet, A. (1998). Reflections on a voice-centered relational method: Analysing maternal and domestic voices. In J. Ribbens & R. Edwards (Eds.), *Feminist dilemmas in qualitative research*: *Public knowledge and private lives* (pp. 119–146). London: Sage.

Menjivar, C. (1997). Immigrant kinship networks: Vietnamese, Salvadorians and Mexicans in comparative perspective. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, *28*, 1–24.

Menjivar, C. (2000). *Fragmented ties*: *Salvadoran immigrant networks in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

McAdoo, H. P. (1998). African-American families. In C. H. Mindel, R. W. Habersteain, & R. Wright, Jr. (Eds.). *Ethnic families in America*: *Patterns and variations* (pp. 361–381). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Oliker, S. J. (2000). Examining care at welfare's end. In M. H. Meyer (Ed.), *Care work*: *Gender*, *labor*, *and welfare state* (pp. 167–185). London: Routledge.

Pooley, J. A., Cohen, L., & Pike, L. T. (2004). Can sense of community inform social capital? *The Social Science Journal*, *42*, 71–79.

Poulin, J. (2005). *Strengths-based generalist practice*: *A collaborative approach*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Portes, A., (2000). The two meanings of social capital. *Sociological Forum*, *15*(1), 1–12.

Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *24*(1), 1–24.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone*: *The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Roberts, J. (2004). What's "social" about "social capital?" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations 6*, 471–493.

Roschelle, A. R. (1997). No more kin: Exploring race, class, and gender in family relations. *Family Relations*, *47*(4), 379–384.

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015

Rossi, P. H., Wright, J. D., Fisher, G. A., & Willis, G. (1987). The urban homeless: Estimating composition and size. *Science*, 235, 1336–1341.
Rubio, M. (1997). Perverse social capital: Some evidence from Columbia. *Journal of Economic Issues*, *31*(3), 805–817.
Schein, V. E. (1995). *Working from the margins*: *Voices of mothers in poverty*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Seccombe, K. (1999). *So you think I drive a Cadillac? Welfare recipients' perspectives on the system and its reform*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
Seccombe, K. (2000). Families in poverty in the 1990s: Trends, causes, consequences, and lessons learned. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *62*, 1094–1113.
Seidman, I. E. (1994). *Interviewing as qualitative research*. New York: Teachers College.
Shinn, M., & Weitzman, B. C. (1996). Homeless families are different. In J. Baumohl (Ed.), *Homelessness in America* (pp. 109–122). Phoenix, AZ: Oryx.
Sloan, V. J., Jason, L. A., & Addlesperger, E. (1996). Social networks among inner-city minority women, *Education*, *117*(2), 194–199.
Small, M. S. (2006). Neighborhood institutions as resource brokers: Childcare centers, interorganizational ties, and resource access among the poor. *Social Problems*, *53*(2), 274–292.
Stack, C. (1974). *All our kin*: *Strategies for survival in black communities*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
Strauss, A. (1987). *Qualitative analysis for social scientists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research*: *Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Szreter, S., & Woolcock, M. (2004). Health by association? Social capital, social theory, and the political economy of public health. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, *33*(4), 650–667.
Toohey, S. M., Shinn, M., & Weitzman, B. C. (2004). Social networks and homelessness among women heads of household. *American Journal Community Psychology*, *33*(1/2), 7–20.
Vega, W. A., Kolody, B., Valle, R., & Weir, J. (1991). Social networks, social support, and their relationship to depression among immigrant Mexican women. *Human Organization*, *50*, 154–162.
Veenstra, G. (2000). Social capital, SES and health: An individual-level analysis. *Social Science & Medicine*, *50*, 619–629.
Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1992). *Overcoming the odds*: *High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
Whitley, R., & McKenzie, K. (2005). Social capital and psychiatry: Review of the literature. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, *13*(2), 71–84.
Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged*: *The inner-city*, *the underclass*, *and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Wilson, W. J. (1996). *When work disappears*: *The world of the new urban poor*. New York: Knopf.
Woolcock, M. M. (2001) The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes. *Isuma*: *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, *2*(1), 11–17.

Downloaded by [New York University] at 12:54 06 January 2015