

A brief introduction to social network theory, with implications for housing mobility policy

By Alima Kamara and Philip Tegeler
(with an annotated bibliography)

Social network theory helps to explain how the various social connections that exist between individuals or groups provide access to different resources, or social capital. The varying degrees of social relationships are often categorized as three distinct “layers.”¹ The innermost layer consists of intimate relations that provide social support (i.e. family and friends). These strong ties are binding in that there is an obligation of reciprocity of services. The intermediary layer consists of bonding ties, which can be a mixture of stronger and weaker ties that provide information and resources. The outer layer is characterized by collective membership (i.e. church or club), providing members with a sense of belongingness even if they do not interact with each other.

The usefulness of social networks to an individual is contingent upon whether he or she wants to gain new information (i.e. about a better job or position) or preserve resources that already exist. Generally, strong ties provide social support and weak ties provide social leverage; the more diverse one’s social network, the more access he or she has to different types of social capital.

Low-income families who live in areas of concentrated poverty are characterized as having strong support networks that enable them to cope with daily life. They can rely on their support networks for such things as informal child care, transportation to work, and informal health care.² Some support networks, however, are more draining than supportive. Draining ties are friends and family members who continually draw resources and support without reciprocating, placing strain on the individual and limiting his or her chances for upward mobility.³

¹ Lin, Nan. A network theory of social capital. April 2005. Duke University. 17 July 2009.
<http://sociology.nccu.edu.tw/Chinese/speech/paper-final-041605.pdf>

² Boyd, Melody L. The role of social networks in the durability of the Gautreaux Two residential mobility program. April 2006. Temple University. 8 July 2009.
http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/8/4/8/9/pages184894/p184894-1.php

³ Curley, Alexandra M. 2008. Relocating the poor: Social capital and neighborhood resources. *Journal of Urban Affairs* (under review).

Regardless of the nature of their support networks, low-income families in disadvantaged neighborhoods generally experience high rates of unemployment, high rates of crime, poor quality education, and increased health risks. When low-income families are living only with neighbors of the same socioeconomic status, they are less likely to have social ties that provide social leverage.

Housing mobility has been identified as a possible policy intervention to give low income families access to more advantaged neighborhoods, to connect families with more dynamic and diverse social networks, and to obtain some social distance from draining or constraining social ties. On the other hand, relocation can also disrupt strong social support networks, which may be detrimental to families' mental/emotional health and economic stability.⁴ In addition, some research has shown that many families who participated in housing mobility programs did not form social leverage ties after relocating to the advantaged neighborhoods and residing there for 1-2 years.⁵ This may be because building new social ties takes time and barriers of race, class, and gender make the process more challenging.

In order to better assist low-income families in their transition to new opportunity neighborhoods, program assistance needs to be provided before and after the move. Prior to the move, social workers or counselors need to inform participants of the challenges they may encounter and suggest that if they have strong support networks to move in family groups or to a location where family and friends are nearby.⁶ Alternatively, moves should consider transportation access to extended family members. If the mobility program is a housing voucher program, vouchers should be geographically targeted with a minimum time requirement of two or three years so that families have more time to build social ties before deciding whether or not to make a secondary move⁷. After the initial move is made, post-move counseling can help to connect low-income families with resources for jobs and other services that will get them more involved and make them feel more integrated in their new communities.⁸

⁴ Boyd 2006; Curley 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See generally, Tegeler, Philip, "Connecting Families to Opportunity: The Next Generation of Housing Mobility Policy," in *All Things Being Equal: Instigating Opportunity in an Inequitable Time* (Brian D. Smedley & Alan Jenkins, eds.), The New Press, pp.79-95 (2007)

Social Network Theory: An Annotated Bibliography
Alima Kamara July 2009

Boyd, Melody L. The role of social networks in the durability of the Gautreaux Two residential mobility program. Temple University, April 2006.

http://www.allacademic.com//meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/1/8/4/8/9/pages184894/p184894-1.php

In Boyd's analysis of the Gautreaux Two housing mobility program, which enabled low-income families living in public housing developments in Chicago to move to higher-opportunity areas, she finds that social network factors significantly influenced whether participants decided to remain in the Gautreaux assignments or make a secondary move to another high-opportunity area or a low-opportunity area. Participants who moved from their Gautreaux assignments to another location tended to feel socially isolated in the Gautreaux neighborhood; they were away from their social support networks of family and friends, and limited transportation options made it difficult to visit them regularly. This was especially a problem for single working mothers who relied on their family and friends for informal child care or participants who had elderly or sick family members who needed their care. Participants who stayed in their Gautreaux neighborhoods were better able to adjust because they were closer to their family and friends, closer to their jobs, had more accessible transportation, and felt more welcomed by their neighbors.

Although low-income families may greatly benefit from moving from areas of concentrated poverty to opportunity areas, there is a chance that their strong support networks will be disrupted. Furthermore, the social ties that allow for upward mobility (social leverage networks) take time to build, especially when there are race, class, and gender barriers to overcome. In order to help low-income families better adjust to their new neighborhoods, Boyd gives the following policy recommendations: offer pre-placement location counseling to inform voucher holders of possible challenges and suggest locations where their family or friends already reside; encourage families to move in groups; extend the time limit requirement for the voucher to two years, allowing families more time to develop social ties before making a secondary move; and provide program assistance even after the families are placed, connecting them to services within the new neighborhood.

Chantarat, Sommarat and Barrett, Christopher B. 2007. Social network capital, economic mobility and poverty traps. <http://mpr.ub.uni-muenchen.de/1947/>

Chantarat and Barrett's article examines the link between social network capital and the ability of poor individuals to escape from poverty. They create a model that shows that for some poor families, social network capital can help them achieve upward mobility; while for other families, their social network capital can leave them trapped in poverty. Assuming there is a cost to building and maintaining new social ties, families who find themselves trapped may choose to remain in isolation and poverty to avoid that cost; or those who would achieve a net benefit from new social ties may want to form relationships that would help them escape from poverty but are unable to because they

are rejected by the other party. Because the usefulness of social capital is contingent upon the economic structure of the neighborhoods in which people reside, public transfers to the poor may provide them with the resources to escape poverty.

Curley, Alexandra M. 2008. Relocating the poor: Social capital and neighborhood resources. *Journal of Urban Affairs* (under review).

This study aims to determine whether low-income families who reside in different types of HOPE VI neighborhoods (mixed-income, off-site with housing voucher, or off-site in other public housing units in areas of concentrated poverty) have different levels of access to social capital. She finds that the strongest predictors for generalized trust, shared norms and values, which constitute one aspect of social capital, are neighborhood resources, place attachment, and perceived safety. This implies that policies may need to shift the focus from creating neighborhoods that are socioeconomically diverse to improving neighborhood institutions and services so that communities are safer and more connected.

Curley, Alexandra M. 2008. HOPE VI- A viable strategy for improving neighborhood conditions and resident self-sufficiency? *Housing Policy Debate* (under review).

In this paper, Curley examines whether the HOPE VI program has been successful in improving neighborhood conditions and increasing resident self-sufficiency. Based on outcomes from the Maverick Gardens HOPE VI program, low-income families have experienced improvements in their neighborhood conditions; although, the program's effectiveness can be increased through several ways (i.e. making the voucher program stronger, replacing all or a majority of destroyed HOPE VI developments on or off-site, etc.). Curley also finds that the HOPE VI program fails to increase self-sufficiency, partly because of misconceptions about the effects of moving to an opportunity neighborhood on the social networks of low-income families. When low-income families relocate to opportunity areas, they may not build or utilize ties with their new neighbors that allow for upward mobility. Thus, Curley recommends that low-income families be provided with broader, long-term supportive services (in addition to housing opportunities) that facilitate access to quality transportation, healthcare, counseling, childcare, job training programs, and educational programs.

Curley, Alexandra M., 2009. Draining or gaining? The social networks of public housing movers in Boston. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* (forthcoming).

Curley's article examines the effects of relocation on the social networks of low-income women from Maverick Gardens, a public housing development that was redeveloped as part of the HOPE VI program. For women who had strong support systems before moving, relocation was detrimental to their mental/emotional health and economic stability because it disrupted their social support networks. For other women who had draining ties (people who constantly drew resources and support without providing any in return) prior to moving, relocation improved their chances for upward mobility because it allowed them to escape those ties. However, none of the women in this study were able to build new ties for social leverage in their new neighborhoods. This may be due to several factors: social leverage networks take more than two years to build; the opportunities to form new ties do not easily arise or they are not taken advantage of when they do; or the

jobs to which the higher-income individuals have access require skills that the low-income individuals lack.

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

Dominguez and Watkins use an ethnographic approach to explore the ways in which African-American and Latin-American low-income mothers utilize their social networks for the purposes of everyday living and social mobility. They distinguish between networks that provide social support and those that provide leverage. Social support networks, which usually include relationships with family members, friends, and institutions, are useful; however, they can be limited in producing social capital because of concerns about (other than a lack of economic resources) level of accessibility, reciprocity, and personal conflict. The social leverage networks are more beneficial the more heterogeneous they are and the more the women are able to build ties that would give them access to new information. However, support networks can hinder social mobility ties, as they often place time-consuming expectations on women.

Ethier, Jason. Current research in social network theory. Northeastern University College of Computer and Information Science.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/11171859/Current-Research-in-Social-Network-Theory>. Retrieved July 8, 2009.

Ethier gives a brief overview of some of the various research topics being covered in social network theory, ranging from politics and economics to health and technology. He begins with a description of social network theory as a field that examines the connections among individuals and groups and assesses the social capital (resources) that those connections provide. The more connections a person has, the more access he or she has to new information and power. Thus, by studying social network theory, researchers can gain a better understanding of human interaction as it applies to various facets of life.

Ethier discusses three topics that are relevant to the issues of poverty and race: political power of social networks, power and stability within social networks, and personal health. Researchers believe that social networks control political participation. Members of a population gain interest in politics if they are connected with individuals who have higher levels of interest and involvement and lose interest if they are connected with individuals with lower levels of interest and involvement, suggesting a positive association between interest and power is necessary for collective action. In areas of concentrated poverty, where members share similarly low levels of power and/or interest, the potential for political involvement is limited. At the same time, their shared equal power brings stability to their social networks, increasing their likelihood of remaining in that group. This has implications for housing mobility programs in which low-income families relocate to opportunity areas; although these families will have access to more resources in their new neighborhoods, social networks in which there are differing levels of power lead to instability over time, causing some families to want to leave opportunity neighborhoods. Research on social networks and health has suggested that diverse social networks may lower an individual's susceptibility to illness (perhaps due to a higher level of exposure and thus a stronger immune system) and lower the risk of mental illness (as more social roles can boost self-esteem because they give life purpose).

Gay, Claudine. 2009. Moving out, moving up: Housing mobility and the political participation of the poor. Harvard University.

http://www.law.columbia.edu/null?&exclusive=filemgr.download&file_id=151510&rtco ntentdisposition=filename%3DClaudine

Using data from the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment, Gay finds that low-income families who moved from public housing units to low-poverty neighborhoods experienced no change in rates of voter registration and had decreased voter participation. It is possible that low-income families are less politically involved in their new neighborhoods because of feelings of social isolation that inhibit them from taking advantage of the resources that may be accessible in low poverty areas. Thus, in order for mobility programs to be more effective in increasing political participation among low-income residents, they need to include interventions that would help low-income families become more socially integrated in their new neighborhoods.

Johnson, Micheal P., Ladd, Helen F., and Ludwig, Jens. 2002. The benefits and costs of residential mobility programmes for the poor. *Housing Studies*,17(1), 125-138.

This article discusses the costs and benefits of housing mobility programs, which are designed to move low-income families from areas of concentrated poverty to areas of low poverty through the use of tenant-based rental subsidies. It offers a framework for cost-benefit analyses of such programs that includes considering the effects on program participants as well as non-participants (i.e. residents of 'destination communities', residents of 'origin communities', taxpayers, etc.) and measuring costs and benefits in a common unit (dollar terms as suggested by the authors). Using empirical evidence from the Gautreaux Program and the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program, the authors argue that mobility programs may benefit participants by improving their safety, physical and mental health, employment, as well as their children's behavior and academic achievement, which in turn, significantly benefits society in monetary terms.

The article based its conclusions on available research, and therefore has the following limitations: it lacks information regarding how non-participants are affected by mobility programs; it focuses on housing voucher programs, excluding other types of housing policies that may have different results; and it lacks information on larger-scale programs.

Lin, Nan. A network theory of social capital. Duke University. April 2005.

<http://sociology.nccu.edu.tw/Chinese/speech/paper-final-041605.pdf>

This paper gives a thorough explanation of a network-based theory of social capital. Social capital refers to the resources embedded within social networks that are accessible and potentially useful to the individuals or groups that are connected. The returns or benefits of social capital can be assessed either by defining social capital in terms of its capacity (accessed social capital) or in terms of its actual use (mobilized social capital). The author also describes the binding, bonding, and bridging relations that exist within social networks and how the extent to which these relations serve network members is based on whether they want to achieve instrumental goals or expressive goals.

Lincoln, Karen D. 2000. Social support, negative social interactions, and psychological well-being. *Social Service Review*, 231-252.

Lincoln provides a literature review that examines the relationship between social support and psychological well-being and pays specific attention to negative interactions, as they are largely overlooked in the research. The general assumption is that support networks have positive effects on a person's psychological well-being; however, this is not always true, as support networks may be more stressful and detrimental than supportive. Lincoln also discusses limitations within the research and implications for social work and future research.

McClurg, Scott D. 2003. Social networks and political participation: the role of social interaction in explaining political participation. *Political Research Quarterly*, 56(4), 449-464.

In this article, McClurg discusses the importance of social networks in political involvement. He argues that the higher the level of political discussion that occurs within social networks, the more likely a person will participate in politics, regardless of the person's status level or relationship with discussant. However, the data do suggest that high-status individuals may be more likely to participate than low-status individuals and that discussions that occur between spouses may be more influential than those that occur between family members and between friends. He offers possible explanations that may need to be substantiated by more evidence.

Osterling, Kathy L. 2007. Social Capital and Neighborhood Poverty: Toward an Ecologically-Grounded Model of Neighborhood Effects. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 16 (1/2).

Osterling evaluates the use of social capital theory, which is defined as social networks formed on the basis of trust and reciprocity, in explaining the 'neighborhood effects' seen in areas of concentrated poverty. Many assume that due to socioeconomic factors, individuals in high-poverty neighborhoods lack social capital and thus fall victim to many social problems, including high unemployment, poor education, and crime. However, Osterling suggests that low-income individuals may actually have comparable amounts of social capital to that of high-income individuals; the difference is in the types of resources that are accessible to the respective groups. Therefore, she proposes a model of social capital that is placed within an ecological context. This model suggests that individuals living in poor neighborhoods can only benefit from increasing their social networks if institutions help to transform their social capital into resources necessary for upward mobility.

Rosenbaum, James E., DeLuca, Stefanie, Zuberi, Anita. 2009. When Does Residential Mobility Benefit Low-Income Families? Evidence from Recent Housing Voucher Programmes. *Benefits*, 17(2), 113-123.

In this article, Rosenbaum et al. evaluate residential mobility as a policy solution to concentrated poverty. As evidenced by the Gautreaux program, moving low-income families from disadvantaged neighborhoods to opportunity areas can potentially improve their economic and social well-being. In addition to increases in employment rates, academic gains, and perceived safety, interviews revealed that participants of the Gautreaux program experienced a new sense of self-efficacy, social responsiveness from their new neighbors, and enhanced social capital in the form of interpersonal and systemic support. The authors compared the outcomes of the Gautreaux program with

those of the MTO program and speculated that because the Gautreaux program involved more drastic changes in environment, it resulted in drastically better outcomes.

Sharkey, Patrick. Neighborhoods and the black-white mobility gap. *Economic Mobility Project*. July 2009.

http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Economic_Mobility/PEW_SHARKEY_v12.pdf?n=1399

This report uses data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to investigate the relationship between neighborhood poverty rates experienced during childhood and the black-white mobility gap. It finds that blacks are more likely than whites to spend their childhood in high poverty neighborhoods and that children who experience high poverty rates throughout their childhood are more likely to experience downward mobility; in fact, neighborhood poverty accounts for one-quarter to one-third of the black-white gap in downward mobility. This report also suggests that decreasing neighborhood poverty rates may improve economic mobility.

According to this report, in order to significantly increase the chances of economic success for children who live in areas of concentrated poverty, public policy initiatives should focus on investing in disadvantaged neighborhoods, rather than moving low-income families out of such neighborhoods. Three programs that the report highlights as models for potentially effective interventions are as follows: Jobs-Plus, New Hope Program, and Harlem Children's Zone.

Son, Joonmo, and Lin, Nan. 2008. Social capital and civic action: A network-based approach. *Social Science Research* 37, 330-349.

Son and Lin use data from the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey to show that social capital generates expressive civic actions (those meant to preserve existing resources within a community) and instrumental civic actions (those meant to obtain new resources to improve a community). From their analyses, they find that individual social capital (the diversity and richness of friendship networks in socioeconomic terms) significantly predicts expressive and instrumental civic actions; organizational social capital (the resources within a voluntary organization) only significantly influences instrumental civic actions; and that women are more likely to participate in expressive civic actions. Although their findings warrant further research, they have the following limitations: the samples were cross-sectional; organizational social capital was measured using the information from survey respondents rather than from organizational census; individual social capital measurements were based only on the information provided in the survey; and civic action measurements were limited to individual actions, as collective actions were unavailable.