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The burden of reciprocity: Processes of exclusion and withdrawal from personal networks among low-income families

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Abstract

Reciprocity has been traditionally treated in sociological and anthropological theory as a force of integration that keeps network members tied together through a complex web of obligations and interdependencies. This article suggests that in the context of poverty it can be a burden and source of relational stress that leads to the demise of social relationships. It is argued that poverty can make it difficult for individuals to maintain relations with others and participate in social support networks because they do not have many resources to share and reciprocate. Recently published ethnographic studies on the social networks of low-income families in the United States form the basis for a micro-level model linking poverty to social fragmentation. By focusing on the suppressive effect of reciprocity, this model identifies two major emergent mechanisms – exclusion and withdrawal – operating in two realms – material and normative – that are conducive to social fragmentation. This article thus promotes our understanding of the ways in which relational dynamics affect low-income families' social well-being and contributes methodologically by laying the groundwork for future empirical research.

Keywords

Low-income families, poverty, reciprocity, social networks, social support

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Introduction

Poverty can constitute a severe barrier to the formation of social ties and limit participation in social networks. Recent research suggests that although reliance on relatives and friends for support constitutes an important coping strategy in low-income families' struggle to make ends meet, the support they receive from their network is very often unreliable, sporadic, and characterized by high relational tension (Domínguez and Watkins, 2003; Edin and Lein, 1997; Howard, 2006; Nelson, 2005; Uehara, 1990). Additionally, quantitative analyses have indicated that low-income families, particularly among minority groups, have lower levels of support than families of higher socioeconomic status (Benin and Keith, 1995; Hogan et al., 1993; Roschelle, 1997). These studies typically examine the amount of support received in various domains (e.g., financial, instrumental, and emotional) from close network members such as relatives, friends, and neighbors. Although they vary in terms of sample used, groups compared, and specific sources and forms of support examined, overall these studies suggest that low-income families are less well-embedded in networks of support than their more affluent counterparts.

This picture diverges from the one portrayed by numerous ethnographic studies conducted in the 1960s. The best known is Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (1974), a study of African American women in a Midwestern town who managed to cope with severe poverty and racial discrimination by building extensive support networks. In Stack's study, the expectation and obligation to reciprocate assistance helped build strong and trustworthy relations in the community, and a close-knit network of support carefully monitored by social control mechanisms (see also Aschenbrenner, 1975; Lomnitz, 1977; Martin and Martin, 1978). Even though Stack mentioned processes of social exclusion by describing how those who did not abide by the rules were ostracized from the network (see also Suttles, 1968), her general conclusion underscores the resilience and strength of poor minority families. This approach, which developed in response to the disorganization theory prevalent at the time, was later criticized for romanticizing (Roschelle, 1997) and even 'glorifying the survival strategies of the poor' (Sarkisian and Gerstel, 2004: 815). Contemporary scholarship suggests that many low-income families receive insufficient or no support from their network and that they are less well-integrated than suggested by prior research. The major goal of this article is to help unravel the underlying mechanisms of social support. By focusing on the dynamics of interpersonal relations between network members, particularly the pressure to reciprocate support, it seeks to reveal the processes that are likely to impede network building and support mobilization among low-income families.

The interactional model developed in this article suggests that poverty can make it difficult for individuals to participate in support networks because they do not have many resources to give and reciprocate with. Because reciprocity entails important expectations and obligations it can be a serious burden and source of relational stress, particularly among low-income families who have limited access to alternative sources of support in the market and are consequently highly dependent on network members for meeting basic daily needs. It is suggested that because of an impaired ability to share and reciprocate support, low-income individuals are likely to be (or perceived to be)

unattractive exchange partners, who are either excluded from social networks or who voluntarily withdraw from them. Thus whereas reciprocity has been traditionally treated as an engine of social integration, a type of 'social glue' that keeps members of a community tied together through a complex web of obligations and interdependencies, this article contends that in the context of poverty it can be a force of fragmentation.

Social fragmentation is defined here as a shortage of 'bonding' social capital (Putnam, 2000). In other words, the term encompasses the scarcity of those forms of support that are critical for daily coping, such as the financial, practical, and emotional assistance individuals typically draw from their strong ties to close members of their network (e.g., parents, extended kin, friends, and neighbors). It does not deal with weak ties and social resources outside the immediate community that are important for socioeconomic mobility (Granovetter, 1983; Wilson, 1996).

A better understanding of the relational dynamics that are likely to impede low-income individuals' ability to maintain and activate these ties is important in light of current policy developments. Since the 1990s, many industrialized nations have restructured welfare by cutting social benefits, imposing new eligibility requirements, and implementing sanctions and time limits (e.g., Gazso and McDaniel, 2010; Korteweg, 2006; Paz-Fuchs, 2008). These welfare reforms have pressured low-income families to become self-reliant and replace official aid with other means (typically employment, often in bad jobs) but they have also implicitly assumed that low-income families have private safety nets to fall back on in times of need (Roschelle, 1997). This assumption is unwarranted. Research has demonstrated that those in the greatest need of network support are the least likely to have it available to them (Edin and Lein, 1997; Henly et al., 2005; Offer, 2012; Phan et al., 2009). Welfare reforms have even been criticized for weakening the 'communal ethos of care' (Oliker, 2000) and accelerating the demise of social networks in poor communities by making it difficult for low-income people to meet obligations to network members and reciprocate support (see also Roschelle, 1997).

The objective of this article is to put forward a theoretical model of social fragmentation among low-income families that draws primarily on empirically grounded ethnographic data. Unlike models developed on the basis of pre-existing theories, the literature, or common sense, the strategy employed here was to analyze empirical findings to generate new theoretical insights. It reviews recently published ethnographic studies on the social networks of low-income families from different racial and ethnic backgrounds in the United States and uses them to construct a model of social fragmentation. It analyzes case study data obtained through an inductive and emergent mode of inquiry to develop the theoretical infrastructure of future empirical work. The underlying rationale for case study research is to enable the pursuit of theory building on the basis of evidence. Consistent with this, a bottom-up approach is considered especially suitable for producing valid empirically attuned insight and novel conceptualizations (Eisenhardt, 1989; George and Bennett, 2005).

The article begins by delving into the anthropological roots of the idea of reciprocity as the cement of social life, and analyzing the use of this concept in sociological theory. The next section describes how social support networks are strategically built and how potential network members are evaluated according to their ability and willingness to share and reciprocate support. The analytic model is then outlined based on the

identification of key themes that emerged from the review of ethnographic studies of low-income families' social networks. The discussion centers on the broader societal implications and recommendations for future research.

Overview: Reciprocity as the 'cement' of social life

Reciprocity, the idea of 'give and take' or helping those who helped you, was long viewed in the social sciences as a powerful mechanism of social integration and solidarity. The expectation and obligation to reciprocate favors establish a cycle of exchanges, which ties people to each other through a complex web of mutual dependencies that facilitates the emergence and maintenance of social relationships. Ever since Malinowski and Mauss, the concept of reciprocity has been extensively debated in the anthropological literature on gift exchanges in archaic societies and has also triggered increasing interest in gift practices in contemporary settings in both western and non-western contexts (e.g., Adloff and Mau, 2006; Komter, 2005; Silber, 2007).

In response to utilitarian approaches that were prevalent in the late nineteenth century, anthropological scholarship suggested that the meaning of gift exchanges is not material (i.e., to access economic resources and generate profit) but rather is symbolic in nature. It was claimed that reciprocal exchanges provide mutually contingent benefits for the parties involved and thus help sustain social relations (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Malinowski, 1984 [1922]; Sahlins, 1972; Simmel, 1978 [1950]). The symbolic nature of gift exchange was perhaps best depicted by Marcel Mauss in one of the most influential essays on this topic, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1990 [1923]). Mauss argued that gifts do not merely represent voluntary and disinterested acts of generosity. Rather they are obligatory in nature, and it is this particular characteristic of gift giving that gives rise to lasting patterns of reciprocal relations. The moral obligation to give, receive, and make a return gift keeps the cycle of gift and counter-gift going and constitutes a powerful mechanism of social cohesion. People are coerced to reciprocate (Simmel, 1978 [1950]) and the costs of failing to do so can be severe, such as losing one's freedom or, in Mauss's words, falling into 'slavery for debt' (1990 [1923]: 42).

Although Mauss's analysis drew on studies of tribal societies, at the end of his essay he contended that gift giving, as a mechanism transcending the law of the market or the state, has important implications for modern society as well. These implications, however, have been largely neglected in current research, as scholars have tended to relegate the study of gifts in contemporary societies to the private sphere (e.g., Cheal, 1988; Godbout, 1998; Komter, 2005). Nevertheless, gift giving continues to play an important integrative role. In China, for example, the exchange of gifts serves to establish and maintain a network of personal connections, known as *guanxi*, which has important normative and instrumental meanings. *Guanxi* networks have been shown to allow managers in the private sector to maintain business relations in instances of a weak rule of law and limited governmental protection (Xin and Pierce, 1996) and help villagers obtain personal financing when state loans and credits are not easily accessible (Yan, 1996). Contemporary scholars have argued that gift giving is one of the cornerstones of the modern welfare state and constitutes a major part of civil society in that the obligations

and feelings of gratitude it engenders serve to nurture social bonds of solidarity (Adloff, 2006; Donati, 2003; Hénaff, 2002).

Not all gifts, however, are based on reciprocity to the same extent. Since Mauss, scholars have further developed the concept of reciprocity by taking into account the diversity of forms and modes of operation of gift (or social) exchange processes (Sahlins, 1972; Silber, 2007). The type of reciprocity most conducive to social integration and solidarity corresponds to what researchers typically refer to as *generalized* reciprocity. Generalized reciprocity is based on indirect multi-party exchanges, in which all parties depend on each other for benefits. The conditions and forms of return under generalized reciprocity are highly flexible and not stipulated in advance. Unlike restricted or balanced reciprocity, to use Sahlins' (1972) typology, generalized reciprocity does not require immediate return, return in the same domain, or even return from the same party (Ekeh, 1974; Yamagishi and Cook, 1993). Seinen and Schram (2006) suggested that people seek to build up a good reputation of 'helpers' by reciprocating assistance to third parties they were not initially socially involved with and that this type of exchange (referred to as 'indirect reciprocity') is used as a strategy for increasing the likelihood that they will be helped in the future.

Generalized reciprocity is based on the idea of extended credit given to group members and on the development of trust relations between them. Individuals are trusted to pay back what they owe. Experimental studies have shown that exchanges based on generalized reciprocity produce higher levels of trust and solidarity, greater commitment, and stronger affective bonds among network members than other types of exchange (Molm et al., 2007, 2009). Uehara (1990), in her study of poor African American women in Chicago who had lost their jobs, found that networks characterized by generalized reciprocity were substantially more supportive and had higher levels of solidarity than networks based on restricted exchanges. Importantly, Uehara indicated that many of the networks she studied were not based on generalized reciprocity but rather on rigid social arrangements and relatively strict terms and schedules of reciprocation.

The concept of reciprocity has attracted much attention in the social sciences, and has led to the development of two distinct conceptual prisms, the utilitarian and normative approaches. In the utilitarian perspective, individuals associate because of the profit they can derive from their interactions with others. Here, obtaining returns is the main motive for fulfilling the expectations of reciprocity. As Blau (1986: 92) argued, reciprocity constitutes 'a necessary condition of exchange that individuals, in the interest of continuing to receive needed services, discharge their obligations for having received them in the past.' Non-reciprocated behaviors will usually lead to the breaking off of social ties.

By contrast, the normative approach claims that people reciprocate because they have a moral obligation to do so. Strong moral sentiments impel people to cooperate and engage in reciprocal relations. This view is best expressed by Gouldner (1960), who treated reciprocity as a universal moral norm, which by morally binding people together contributes to the development of trust between them.

Yet despite their fundamentally divergent interpretations of reciprocity, both perspectives share the view that reciprocity is crucial for the creation and maintenance of ties and social systems (Adloff and Mau, 2006). Reciprocity makes social exchange possible

and leads to social integration. For Gouldner, it serves as a social regulator, that 'inhibits the emergence of exploitative relations' (1960: 174). A system based on the norm of reciprocity is therefore more powerful and stable over time than social arrangements based on conformity or status duties alone. For Blau, social integration is typically a byproduct of reciprocal exchanges which through 'the resulting mutual exchange of favors strengthens, often without explicit intent, the bond [between people]' (1986: 16).

The literature on reciprocity also highlights the non-integrative function of social (or gift) exchange. This is what Blau (1986) referred to as processes of differentiation. Unbalanced, or asymmetric exchange can lead to competition and rivalry, coercion, abuse, and exploitation (Emerson, 1976). The North American potlatch ceremony provides a good illustration, where parties compete over power and status by providing increasingly large gifts that are difficult to reciprocate. The failure to reciprocate under these circumstances serves to establish a status hierarchy and validate claims of superiority (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Mauss, 1990 [1923]).

Giving too little in return, or failing to reciprocate altogether, can thus induce dependency and eventually lead to exclusion from future exchanges, in that information about uncooperativeness spreads quickly in the network. Individuals are concerned about their reputation, especially when ties to others with whom they wish to maintain ongoing contact are involved (Nelson, 2005; Stack, 1974). Research shows that people do not want to fall into debt, which puts them in an inferior position vis-a-vis others in the network (Coleman, 1990; Uehara, 1995), and that extensive reliance on network members for support can lead to criticism, scorn, and degradation (McIntyre et al., 2003). This can motivate individuals to limit ties to others in the network to avoid judgmental interactions and maintain a sense of self-pride (Domínguez and Watkins, 2003; Nelson, 2005).

Reciprocity and the strategic building of social support networks

According to Bourdieu (1990) the obligatory and coercive nature of the gift is masked by the passage of time between the gift and counter-gift and makes the act of giving appear to be a voluntary expression of generosity. The time lag between the gift and counter-gift helps hide the sometime extensive process of calculation that underlies social exchanges. Recent research suggests that networks are purposely constructed by identifying and screening potential members. For example, in her study of children's care networks, Hansen (2005) describes how parents take the emotional and physical health of potential caregivers, as well as their skills with children into consideration before including them in their network. People who are judged to be incompetent, unreliable, inaccessible, and those whose child-rearing philosophy is incompatible with the parents' worldview or are likely to provide negative role models are categorically excluded.

Nelson (2005) refers to this process as 'the work of sociability.' It consists of locating others who can meet certain needs, negotiating with them terms of support, and making compromises. When people ask for assistance, they tend to evaluate their own as well as others' needs and resources. Hence, the acts of giving, receiving, and reciprocating can be highly instrumental and calculative (Finch and Mason, 1993; Hansen, 2005; Nelson,

2005). One important factor underlying the work of sociability consists of evaluating others' ability and willingness to reciprocate. Individuals will tend to engage in relations with others to the extent that they believe these people will reciprocate (Blau, 1986).

The perception of balance and fairness is crucial for the maintenance and long-term survival of social relationships, even in relations determined by a set of rights and duties (Finch and Mason, 1993; Nelson, 2005). According to Schwartz (1967), participants in social exchanges are involved in a 'balance of debt': to keep the cycle of exchange going, someone has to remain in debt to the other. The continuing balance of debt 'now in favor of one member, now in favor of the other' (1967: 8) ensures that the relationship continues. Nevertheless, in the long run a sense of fairness that the contributions to or investments in the relationship equal the amount of benefits accrued is required for the relationship to endure (Schwartz, 1967).

The terms of reciprocity, however, are not universal (Sahlins, 1972). What people consider an adequate return, or a balanced exchange, depends on the type of social relationship and the strength of the tie involved. Compared to intimate ties between members of a nuclear family (e.g., spouses and children), social relationships to close members of the network such as relatives, friends, and neighbors have stricter terms of reciprocation and are more vulnerable to imbalances (Plickert et al., 2007; Wellman and Wortley, 1990). This idea is nicely illustrated by Nelson (2000) who distinguished between different 'logics' of reciprocity. Nelson notes that the low-income single mothers she interviewed adopted a narrow definition of balanced reciprocity in their relationships with other similarly disadvantaged single mothers in the community with whom they engaged in 'exchanges of equivalent material goods and services' (2000: 298). By contrast, these mothers did not feel pressured to conform to a norm of balanced reciprocity in their relationship to better-off network members. In these situations, which mainly included exchanges with close relatives, the mothers adopted an extended time frame of reciprocation and tended to define returns in terms of gratitude, loyalty, or simply satisfaction and pleasure on the part of the giver (see also Hansen, 2005: 158–159).

Expectations of reciprocity also vary across networks and contexts. In particular socioeconomic status has been shown to impact participation in support networks. Ecological studies show that neighborhood deprivation fosters distrust (Anderson, 1999), makes residents less likely to assist others in need (Smith, 2007), and inhibits participation in reciprocal exchanges (Phan et al., 2009; Sampson et al., 1999). The Seinen and Schram (2006) study of the development of group norms suggests why a lack of resources may inhibit social participation and cooperation. Their findings indicate that in groups where there are many defectors, individuals tend to adjust their own behavior by reducing their tendency to help others. This dynamic leads to overall diminishing levels of cooperation and support within the group.

Toward a model of social fragmentation among low-income families

This article thus suggests that the pressure to reciprocate support can be a major burden for low-income families. It is claimed that poverty can make it difficult to provide

support to others because people do not have much to share and because it restricts their ability to reciprocate support. The model of social fragmentation described here captures two mechanisms, exclusion and withdrawal, in two realms, material and normative.

Exclusion refers to the active prohibition of individuals who are (or are perceived to be) a burden on others to participate in the network. Those who are unwilling, unable, or have a limited ability to reciprocate tend to be excluded from participating in the network and accessing its resources. *Withdrawal* is the exemption of self from participation in the network. It is based on self-imposed restrictions that make individuals voluntarily disengage from their network. This distinction points to different motivations in that the former is other-, and the latter self-, oriented.

The *material* realm refers to those tangible resources that are crucial for the daily functioning of low-income families, such as money, goods, and assistance with childcare, transportation, and other services. While it may be challenging to negotiate social relationships in all circumstances, recent scholarship suggests that it might be especially difficult to do so in conditions of poverty because of the scarcity of resources. Unlike more affluent families, not only is it more difficult for low-income families to provide and return support because they are typically embedded in resource-poor networks (Goldstein and Warren, 2000; Henly, 2002; Phan et al., 2009), but these families are also more dependent on others because of their restricted ability to purchase services in the market, and they are more vulnerable to fluctuations in their own as well as their network members' socioeconomic conditions. Poverty can thus limit the ability to uphold the norm of reciprocity, weaken social relationships, and impinge on the process of network building and mobilization.

The *normative* realm refers to those values shaping perceptions of self-worth in contemporary western society; namely, self-sufficiency and economic independence, which constitute a major source of stress for low-income families. Critical scholars have contended that the emphasis on personal responsibility in capitalist societies, as part of the expanding neoliberal ideology of the free market, has given dependence a bad name by associating it with shame and degradation (Bauman, 2001; McIntyre et al., 2003). Hence, the contradiction between these values and the constant struggle to make ends meet constitutes a major source of tension for low-income families (Hays, 2003; Hennessy, 2009), who usually seek to conceal their needs and failures to meet them independently (Hansen, 2005; Nelson, 2005). Oliker (2000) argued that this normative climate has turned reciprocal relations into a burden that is better to avoid.

The ways in which these two dimensions interact to foster social fragmentation are summarized in Figure 1 and explained in greater detail using illustrations from recent ethnographic studies of low-income families' social networks in the sections that follow. It should be noted that this model serves as an analytic tool to identify the restrictions and motivations that can inhibit participation in helping networks. In actual practice, however, it may be difficult to distinguish between these mechanisms because they are not mutually exclusive but rather occur simultaneously since individuals usually act as both givers and receivers in their networks.

	Exclusion	Withdrawal
Material	Maintain scarce resources	Avoid exhausting others' scarce resources
Normative	Maintain social status	Avoid others' criticism

Figure 1. Processes of social fragmentation among low-income families.

Material exclusion: Maintain scarce resources

Individuals' ability to provide and reciprocate assistance is to a large extent contingent upon the material resources at their disposal. The idea of reciprocity implies that people seek to establish relations primarily with those who can give back and will tend to exclude those who have a limited ability, or who are not willing to do so. Because poor individuals are likely to have many needy people in their network, they can easily become overwhelmed and have their own resources drained if they respond to all their network members' demands (Belle, 1983; Goldstein and Warren, 2000; Henly, 2002; Phan et al., 2009; Roschelle, 1997). The deliberate decision to exclude others and refuse to provide them support can therefore be a strategy aimed at avoiding ties to those who are (or may be) too demanding and likely to lead to resource depletion.

Nelson (2005), in her study of low-income white single mothers in rural Vermont, shows how mothers defined reciprocity in ways that allowed them to negotiate relations with relatives, neighbors, and friends and obtain support. Her account, however, also reveals the potentially detrimental aspects of reciprocity. Nelson indicates that many mothers kept a 'mental balance sheet of who had loaned, and of who was owed, as well as of their awareness of her reliability in paying back her debts' (2005: 75). Using this balance sheet, mothers sometimes excluded others from their network. This is what happened to Barbara Quesnel, who deliberately decided not to help her friend, also a single mother, because '[she] took more than she gave and was not sensitive to availability' (2005: 77). The subjective assessment that the relationship was imbalanced, and the feeling that her former friend's requests were a net drain on her emotional and material resources, led Barbara to eventually exclude her from the network.

Menjívar's (2000) ethnographic study on the challenges faced by Salvadoran immigrants in the San Francisco area to integrate into the host society provides further evidence on the idea of material exclusion. Menjívar's study highlights the adverse effects of severe destitution on immigrants' social networks. One particularly insightful example relates to Conchita, an immigrant in her mid-sixties, who after a serious confrontation with her son Gilberto, made him and his family leave her house although they had nowhere else to go. Conchita felt her son, who had been unable to repay her, was a serious burden and she was afraid that her employers would retaliate for the money she had borrowed from them to help him. This event represented the culmination of much tension and frustration that had built up between the two over time. Gilberto felt devastated and decided to cut off his relationship with his mother. Like many other immigrants, Conchita had obligations to multiple network members, but too many people had been making claims on Conchita's meager resources and she had to make painful decisions.

She could not help all her network members and had to refuse to provide support to those she felt were taking advantage of her by not adequately returning her favors.

The costs of refusing to help others in need, however, can be high. The refusal to provide support may allow people to reduce their burdens and evade never-ending obligations to network members, but it may also lead to the disintegration of the relationship altogether. The case of Conchita exemplifies Menjívar's argument that even social networks based on kinship 'are not infallible and can weaken under extreme conditions of poverty' (2000: 33). Furthermore, saying 'no' to network members may hinder one's ability to mobilize them in the future if the need arises.

Material withdrawal: Avoid exhausting others' scarce resources

Poverty may also lead people to voluntarily withdraw from social relationships if they feel that they will not be able to contribute to the network or fail to adequately reciprocate support, which will lead to the exhaustion of others' scarce resources. According to Hansen's (2004) 'rules of asking,' this concern corresponds to the idea of asking for support if the request does not impose upon the other party and does not create a burden. For example, Nelson (2005) describes the deliberations of Anne Davenport, a recently divorced mother in her late twenties, about who to turn to for help. Anne explained that she was expected to take into account the needs and resources at the disposal of her network members and avoid taking advantage of them. She believed 'it was her responsibility to be sensitive to whether or not someone was able to "handle" a request at a given time' (2005: 76). Similarly, Edin and Lein (1997), who interviewed low-income single mothers about their economic survival strategies, indicate that many mothers avoided over-relying on a small number of network members for support so as not to exhaust their goodwill. The mothers interviewed usually preferred to tap a large number of people in their network instead to make sure that their requests would not be turned down.

Having limited resources to give and reciprocate may also lead individuals to avoid asking for support in the first place if the request is perceived to create too much stress for others. Menjívar's ethnography provides several illustrations. For example, María Luisa and Humberto, a couple in their early thirties, decided to move out of their cousin's apartment because, as they explained, 'We can't abuse her [kindness] anymore. We can't find work, we can't give her money for coffee here, much less repay the money she lent us or send money to my mother. She's kind but she lives from day to day too, so we have to be considerate' (Menjívar, 2000: 121). The experience of Rosario is another example. Rosario, who owed a large sum of money to her uncle, felt very distressed and expressed much discomfort about not been able to repay her cousins, with whom she shared a small studio, or help them pay the rent and utility bills. 'I'm more of a burden than anything else,' she complained (Menjívar, 2000: 119). Rosario eventually moved out and, with the help of a community organization, found a cleaning job. She maintained only very distant ties with her cousins out of fear that they might think she needed a favor.

Normative exclusion: Maintain social status

As Hansen (2005) indicated, individuals can refuse to help others and exclude them from their network if these people pose a threat to their status or reputation or if they are

judged unfit. This type of concern may make people even turn a blind eye to relatives and friends in need. Consider for example the case of Tasha, a 40-year-old African American single mother of six interviewed by Domínguez and Watkins (2003) in their qualitative study of the support networks of low-income women in Boston. Tasha complained about her two drug addict sisters: 'I had to start not opening the door for them and I instructed the boys to do the same. It was too crazy with them with the drugs. My sisters are a reminder of what it used to be like [when Tasha herself was drug-addicted] and I get defensive and arrogant around them. I don't like it' (2003: 119). Not only were her sisters a net drain on her emotional resources, but Tasha felt they posed a threat to her status and lifestyle and constituted a negative role model for her children. She eventually decided to limit her ties to them.

Threats to one's status were also described by Smith (2007), who studied the job referral networks of low-income African Americans in Michigan. Smith observed that many job-holders were reluctant to help network members find jobs because they were concerned that once hired, their referrals would act badly on the job, thus compromising their own reputation and eventually jeopardizing their job. Smith further argues that although her respondents indicated that they were more likely to help close relatives and friends than distant acquaintances, even close ties were sometime denied assistance. The respondents were more likely to help close relatives because of their greater familiarity with their past behaviors and successful past exchanges with them, rather than out of familial obligations. Similar concerns were described by Newman (1999). In her study of working poor families in Harlem, Newman reported that many inner city residents had social ties to members of the middle class but that these ties were not easily mobilized because those in a better position often wish to 'cut themselves off from any contaminating links with the underclass' (1999: 168).

Often labeled 'no good' and refused any form of support, those at the bottom of the ladder can be a living reminder to better-off members of the network of their past and the potential of backsliding. This phenomenon is well documented in the literature on immigrant communities, in which veteran immigrants who have improved their social standing in the host community feel embarrassed and ashamed of newcomers and seek to socially and physically distance themselves from them (e.g., Mahler, 1995; Menjívar, 2000; Portes, 1998).

Normative withdrawal: Avoid others' criticism

According to Schwartz (1967), the exchange of goods and services is based on a subjective perceptual process of evaluation and appraisal of others' identity, needs, and wishes. To accept a service means that the receiver accepts the giver's understanding and interpretation of her/his status and social position. It can lead to domination, control, and the imposition of the giver's definition of the receiver, particularly in recurring unreciprocated gestures (Blau, 1986). As a result people may decline support, or not ask for it in the first place, 'with a conscious view to affirming the selfhood whose status an acceptance would threaten' (Schwartz, 1967: 3). This is consistent with Hénaff's (2002) interpretation of the return gift as a means to reclaim one's autonomy rather than an act of restitution.

Individuals evaluate the consequences of receiving support and their ability to reciprocate, including the losses they may incur by engaging in the relationship, and decide accordingly whether or not to ask for support. Hansen (2004) specifies that people often refrain from asking for assistance if the cost seems too high. The cost in this case refers to the self-disclosure of one's vulnerabilities and weaknesses. Requesting support, or relying too much on someone else's assistance without the ability to adequately reciprocate, can be a sign of dependence and incompetence that may open the door to criticism and threaten one's self-esteem (McIntyre et al., 2003). Smith (2007) provides an instructive illustration. Chauncey Gibson and his wife were both unemployed and relied on public assistance to support themselves and their two children. Chauncey had asked his stepfather to give him a referral but was turned down. Feeling distrusted and fearing further rejections he adhered to the principle of self-sufficiency, saying that 'I know a lot of people, but I don't call on people. I just don't. I'm self sufficient. Oh man, that's me. I don't get into that, man, because I've tried before, right? What I despise is the way people judge me when I'm in need, actually' (Smith, 2007: 118).

Thus, individuals may decide to withdraw from social relationships that they consider judgmental to maintain their pride and avoid scorn and degradation. 'I like to do things on my own, I like to be self-sufficient, so [asking for help is] not something I do a lot,' stated Cathy Earl, one of the single mothers interviewed by Nelson (2005: 68), who further argued that she did not like to rely on others for assistance. This type of concern has important implications when deciding whom to ask for support. As Nelson (2005) indicates, the single mothers she studied often turned to other single mothers rather than relatives because they assumed that single mothers would be more sympathetic to their needs and less judgmental. Cathy Earl said that she 'preferred to borrow small sums of money from her friends rather than from her brothers because she could not stand being seen "as somebody who just can't make it" ' and that she 'calculated the decision to privilege her pride over their disdain' (Nelson, 2005: 85, 86), which led her to receive overall less support. Similarly, Anne Davenport, another of Nelson's interviewees, explained that she often relied on her friend, also a single mother, for support because she trusted her friend to respect her.

One alternative strategy is to avoid or minimize contact with network members and turn to social service agencies for support instead. This is the choice made by Beverly, an African American mother of four interviewed by Domínguez and Watkins (2003). Beverly argued that not relying on her network members allowed her to maintain her confidentiality and reciprocate on her own terms: 'I don't want to discuss what's going on with me and my kids too much with my sisters. My business will be everywhere – the church, people we know, whatever. I don't let them get too involved with what my situation is when they ask me how I'm doing' (2003: 119). In this way, Beverly was able to reduce the burden and stress associated with relying on her network for support, avoid criticism, and negotiate reciprocal relations on her own terms.

Conclusion and directions for future research

This article has sought to develop a micro-level model linking poverty to social fragmentation by focusing on the suppressive, rather than integrative, function of reciprocity.

Recent ethnographic studies on the social networks of low-income families in the United States were reviewed to identify the relational processes that lead to the dissolution of social ties and the demise of social networks. Interestingly, the two mechanisms of fragmentation outlined in this article – exclusion and withdrawal – correspond to the two aspects of reciprocity specified in the literature about gift exchange – integration and differentiation. However, unlike the distinction made by Blau (1986) who treats them as competing forces, the analysis presented here suggests that in the context of poverty both mechanisms can be conducive to social fragmentation: the former operates by undermining people's ability to participate in the mutual exchange of material and other resources, whereas the latter makes people disengage socially from their network out of concern for their status and reputation.

The contribution of this article to research on poverty is not only theoretical but also methodological as it lays the groundwork for future empirical inquiry The model proposed here can stimulate research by providing a wide analytic prism for investigating and interpreting data collected in future research. Its core constructs can be used as general heuristic tools, but researchers interested in pursuing this endeavor also need to take into account the specific social and cultural context in which the relational processes are embedded.

For example, social fragmentation may vary by race and ethnicity. The examples provided in this article point to similarities in processes of material and normative exclusion and withdrawal experienced by families of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This is not to say that racial and ethnic differences do not exist. On the contrary, much empirical evidence suggests that they do, but more work is required in order to determine their effect on the relational dynamics of low-income families. First, there is a debate in the literature on whether African Americans or Latinos are more likely to participate in social support networks compared to whites not only because of their economic disadvantage but also because of their cultural orientation (McPherson et al., 2006; Roschelle, 1997; Sarkisian and Gerstel, 2004). Research provides mixed results that make it difficult to draw general conclusions since, as Sarkisian and Gerstel (2004) indicate, studies of support differ greatly in terms of the type, form, and source of support examined, as well as the demographic characteristics of the groups compared (e.g., marital status, life course stage, and level of education). Future research should examine how groups that differ in the value they place on the family, level of obligation to co-ethnics, and adherence to collectivist norms interpret reciprocity and respond to the pressures it entails. Research would also benefit from testing whether these factors affect people's tendency to engage more in processes of exclusion or withdrawal.

Additionally, the adverse effect of neighborhood deprivation on participation in social support networks may differ by race and ethnicity. Studies have found that African Americans are more vulnerable to neighborhood poverty than whites and Latinos with respect to assistance with job finding (Elliot and Sims, 2001; Smith, 2007) and access to community resources (Small and McDermott, 2006). One can plausibly expect these community-level factors to also affect the ability of families of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to engage in reciprocal relations with network members.

Future empirical study of these issues is important to promote a better understanding of the processes through which relational dynamics affect low-income families' social

well-being, a relatively neglected issue in current research which speaks to pressing policy concerns. The literature reviewed in this article suggests that those most in need cannot rely on their networks for support. This is the double-edged sword of deprivation, which Komter (1996, 2005) refers to as the 'negative side' of reciprocity. The model proposed here helps explain why this is the case and suggests that assistance to these families should be provided through formal channels such as social service institutions and community-based organizations. It also helps reveal the sources of social inequality and raises questions regarding social solidarity in contemporary society, its meaning, and prevalence. Such concerns go back to Mauss, who saw the decline in the principle of reciprocity in modern social relations as the major obstacle to the renewal of a contemporary social contract (Adolff and Mau, 2006).

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Author biography

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Résumé

La réciprocité est traditionnellement traitée dans la théorie sociologique et anthropologique comme une force d'intégration permettant le maintien des liens entre les membres d'un réseau par le biais d'un ensemble complexe d'obligations et d'interdépendances. Cet article soumet l'hypothèse que, dans un contexte de pauvreté, la réciprocité peut devenir un fardeau et une source de stress relationnel conduisant à la disparition des relations sociales. En effet la pauvreté peut rendre difficile le maintien des relations entre les individus et la participation aux réseaux de soutien social puisqu'il y a peu de ressources à partager et qu'il est malaisé de rendre la pareille. De récentes études ethnographiques sur les réseaux sociaux de familles à faibles revenus aux États-Unis forment la base d'un

modèle de micro-niveaux unissant pauvreté et fragmentation sociale. En mettant l'accent sur l'effet repressif de la réciprocité, ce modèle identifie deux principaux mécanismes émergents - l'exclusion et le retrait – qui opèrent dans deux domaines – matériel et normatif – et qui favorisent la fragmentation sociale. Cet article contribue à la compréhension de la manière dont les dynamiques relationnelles affectent le bien-être social des familles à faibles revenus et contribue à la méthodologie de la recherche en jetant les bases d'une future investigation empirique.

Mots-clés

Familles à faibles revenus, pauvreté, réciprocité, réseaux sociaux, soutien social

Resumen

La reciprocidad ha sido tradicionalmente tratada en la teoría sociológica y antropológica como una fuerza de integración que mantiene los miembros de una red amarrados en una malla compleja de obligaciones e interdependencias. Este artículo sugiere que en contextos de pobreza, esto puede ser un peso y la fuente de estrés relacional que conduce a la desaparición de las relaciones sociales. Se argumenta que la pobreza puede dificultar que los individuos mantengan relaciones con otros y participen en redes de apoyo social, porque no tienen los recursos necesarios para compartir y reciprocar. Estudios etnográficos recientemente publicados sobre redes sociales en familias de bajos ingresos en Estados Unidos componen la base para un modelo de microanálisis que asocia pobreza y fragmentación social. Con foco en los efectos de supresión de la reciprocidad, este modelo identifica dos mecanismos emergentes principales –exclusión y retirada- operando en dos esferas –material y normativa- que conducen a la fragmentación social. Así, este artículo propone entender cómo las dinámicas relacionales afectan el bienestar de las familias de bajos ingresos, y contribuye metodológicamente sentando las bases para futuras investigaciones empíricas.

Palabras clave

Familias de bajos ingresos, pobreza, reciprocidad, redes sociales, apoyo social