Persistent poverty in the Netherlands
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6. Bonds in everyday life: The weakness of weak ties

6.1. Introduction: Boosting social capital

Since the 1970s, welfare states have faced difficulties in preserving social security arrangements and, therefore, they continuously reformed these systems. In search of achievable reforms, one alternative is that citizens—instead of the state—take care of its members. This alternative is related to communitarism, who favor a social order in which “the community” identifies the common good, and persuades its members to act towards it. A prominent founder of this movement and an advocate for Dutch policy, Amitai Etzioni, argues that advanced industrial societies of the capitalist West suffer from “rampant moral confusion and social anarchy” because individuals have been given too much freedom and not enough responsibilities (Etzioni, 1996). Communities must therefore be revitalized, because more community means less government (Briggs, 2001; p. 5). To revitalize communities and thereby be able to cut back on social security arrangements, policy could be directed to boost social capital—the actors’ ability to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks (Portes, 1998; p. 6)\(^{101}\). In practice, policy seeks to increase social capital by “mixing” various people, usually the poor with the non-poor. The idea\(^ {102}\) is that affluent groups are in a better position to generate reciprocal relationships and, therefore, muster more social capital (Fernandez Kelly, 1995; p. 218). For example, the World Bank has declared social capital a key tool for both understanding poverty and reducing it worldwide (Briggs, 2001; p. 4). Mai Wann proposes a strategy of “building social capital” in order to create a welfare system based on the principle of subsidiarity, through active public support for self-help and mutual aid groups (cf. Wann, 1995, in Field, 2003; p. 118). According to Robert Putnam (2000; p. 318), as the only changeable form of capital, policy should be aimed at increasing social capital: “precisely because poor people (by definition) have little economic capital and face formidable obstacles in acquiring human capital (that is, education), social capital is disproportionately important to their welfare.” Putnam (see also 1995)
found that the USA appeared rich in terms of its associations and civic life, but appeared to be quickly declining (cf. Halpern, 2005; p. 199). He suspected a gradual death of American community, that would cause many social problems. This idea to solve social problems with the help of social capital is, however, criticized by other scholars (Portes, 1998; p. 19; Portes & Landolt, 2000; p. 535; Boggs 2001; p. 282-290;103 For example, DeFilippis (2001; p. 800) argued that social capital becomes divorced from other forms of capital, stripped of power relations, and imbued with the assumption that social networks are win-win relationships; and, that individual gains, interests, and profits are synonymous with group gains, interests, and profits. For these reasons, social capital becomes a panacea for social problems: scholars advocate its enhancement as a remedy for social ills, but they can also be oblivious to its negative effects (Portes & Landolt, 2000; p. 534). According to Blokland (2002; p. 107-8), Putnam does not consider social inequality – economic or racial. In fact says Blokland, Putnam reduces social inequality to the logical outcome of social contacts, community, and social cohesion, rather than being the result of lack of opportunities and exploitation. Once social inequality becomes synonymous with disintegration, solving social inequality is just a matter of building more social bridges and connections. Concerning social inequality, there is more at stake than just the lack of community and social cohesion. Claibourn and Martin (2000; p. 267) furthermore argue that despite the growing push to build social capital as public policy, and the ever growing literature, there is still much “uncertainty about the mechanisms that foster social capital.”

Indeed, there is much disagreement among scholars whether boosting social capital is an adequate policy intervention. It may be a very pleasant idea, of course, to solve poverty by mixing the poor with the non-poor. Some even question whether this is really the original intention behind social mixing and gentrification104. In the Netherlands, the rationale behind social mixing is not to promote upward mobility among urban dwellers. According to Uitermark (2003), urban restructuring policy (which is almost the same as mixing the poor with the non-poor) attempts to facilitate the social management of disadvantaged neighborhoods. It serves to mitigate (by spreading) the social effects of the integration of ethnic minorities. He and his colleagues argue that gentrification is used to pacify tensions and to reduce concentrations that pose a problem for authorities (Uitermark et al., 2007).
To pursue this question of whether this is an adequate policy intervention to promote upward mobility, I have to take a closer look at how people in poverty deal with their everyday social bonds. This enables us better to grasp social capital theory and its policy designs. I need to know how people in poverty might use their social capital to get out of poverty, and why they fail when they do. Consequently, this chapter examines mechanisms behind social capital, and answers the question why the respondents’ social connections (which they have, see Table 2.2) do not necessarily offer an escape out of poverty. By answering this question, we will know in the first place whether boosting social capital is an adequate policy intervention to lessen poverty and, second, why the respondents’ social capital is insufficient to get out of poverty.

6.2. Social capital theory and the strength of weak ties

Research on social capital and impoverishment distinguishes between social support (getting by) and social leverage (getting ahead). Ties that offer social support help individuals to get by or to deal with the demands of everyday life. Social support is most often associated with strong (bonding) ties, which tend be made among kin, neighbors, and intimate friends (Dominguez & Watkins, 2003; p. 112-3). Affiliative networks that offer social leverage help individuals to get ahead, changing their opportunity structure. Leverage-producing ties – bonds outside one’s immediate family – are often weak ties. Weak ties are relationships characterized by infrequent interaction or low intimacy. They are wide ranging and are likely to serve as bridges across social boundaries (cf. Bian, 1997; p. 366). These ties promote upward mobility by providing access to education and employment (Boissevain, 1974; Campbell et al., 1986; Granovetter, 1974; in: Dominguez & Watkins, 2003; p. 113). However, because these weak ties can promote upward mobility, they are assumed to be very powerful. People in poverty can make use of these weak ties to find, for example, a job, ending their underprivileged position. Therefore, scholars speak about the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Nevertheless, how do these weak ties operate?

Just how does the “strength of weak ties” work? As I argued before, strong ties offer resources for daily getting by, making it difficult to change one’s opportunity structure. According to Wacquant (1998; p. 27), these strong ties are even impediments to get out of poverty. He writes: “Affiliative ties and bonds of obligation with friends and associates in the ghetto constitute a resource for survival,
but they create impediments and obstacles when attempting to move up and into the official labor market – ties that bind and keep you down” (Monroe & Goldman, 1988; MacLeod, 1994, in Wacquant, 1998; p. 27). Because these strong ties seem to prevent people from getting out of poverty, the necessary condition for real economic development entails a shift to other, looser networks. Thus, a shift from getting by to getting ahead entails a shift from bonding to bridging social networks (Leonard & Onyx, 2003; p. 189); and accordingly, from strong to weak ties. These weak ties are productive, but the question remains, what makes them valuable? Scholars address this hypothesis. Granovetter interviewed (1974) many people to find out how networks are used to get new jobs. He found that most jobs were found through “weak” acquaintances. The hypothesis of “the strength of weak ties” is that weaker ties tend to form bridges that link individuals to other social circles for information, which is not likely to be available in their own circles, and that such information should be useful to the individuals (Lin 1999; p. 469). Weak ties reach out beyond the immediate community of fellow-workers or neighbors, where information on jobs rapidly becomes redundant, to people and places that provide new information and help in finding work (Richards & Roberts, 1998; p. 3). Overall, the results of social capital models suggest that individuals with well-connected (read: weak ties) social networks do better in the labor market (Mouw, 2003; p. 871). These weak ties offer job information and access to the labor market and, consequentially, provide resources to get out of poverty. Scholars are particularly interested in these weak ties, because they promote upward mobility. As a policy intervention, providing people in poverty with more weak ties – mixing the affluent with the poor – might help the latter to end their dependent position. I present some results from studies using this distinction, that will enable us to grasp whether this is actually a good suggestion.

Social scientists know that everyday survival in poor urban communities frequently depends on close interaction with kin and friends in similar situations (cf. Stack, 1974). The problem is that such ties seldom reach beyond the inner city, thus depriving their inhabitants of sources of information about employment opportunities elsewhere and ways to take advantage of them (Portes, 1998; p. 13-4). These results are corroborated, and among the authors who address the difference between getting ahead via weak ties, or getting by via strong ties, Beggs et al., (1996; p. 217) support the idea that strong, homophilous ties and dense, homogeneous networks are more effective channels of social support in routine and crisis.
situations than are weak, heterophilus ties and wide-ranging networks. The findings of Henly et al. (2005) support the contention that informal aid is important for the everyday survival of low-income families, but it is less able to assist with economic mobility\textsuperscript{109}. For those receiving financial support, the level of support was only a fraction of the typical welfare payment or monthly earnings (ibid. p. 135)\textsuperscript{110}. Fernandez Kelly (1995) writes that research on impoverished populations shows that their survival largely depends on relations of mutuality (Fernandez Kelly, 1995; p. 218). Her research proved that some networks are loaded with strong family and friendship bonds; but they lack bridges to other social networks that control access to a larger set of opportunities and meanings (ibid. p. 242). Dutch researchers concluded that the majority of the research group either received social support from relatives or did not have any social connections at all (cf. Engbersen, 2000). Briggs argues, if the group in question is chronically poor, within-group solidarity is typically a much generator of getting by support than getting-ahead leverage (Briggs, 1998); a finding that underlines the critical importance of effective and durable social bridges (cf. Briggs, 2001; p. 8). Recently Putnam and Feldstein (2003) attempted to “descend from the statistical heights of \textit{Bowling Alone} to ground level (p. 5),” by acknowledging that “bridging social capital is harder to create than bonding social capital…the kind of social capital that is most essential for healthy public life … is hardest to build (p. 3)\textsuperscript{111}.” The authors focus on the social-capital success stories (p. 5), especially on how bridging occurred on the micro level. However, they failed to show how people in poverty could get ahead via weak ties. Even though these scholars note that bonding equals strong ties, and bridging equals weak ties. In fact, there is little evidence anywhere on how people in poverty use their weak ties to get ahead.

There are also some difficulties involved in social capital theory. First, scholars dispute the general notion that bonding coincides with strong ties, and bridging with weak ties. For instance, Leonard and Onyx (2003) suggest that loose and strong ties are not synonymous with bridging and bonding. In general, loose and strong ties differ in degree rather than in kind and people prefer to bridge through their strong ties. Second, Granovetter’s study (1974) is often used as an exemplar for how the so-called weak ties operate. Although, many studies have shown that social capital theory is a powerful tool in explaining how labor markets operate, they often exclude the unemployed and the underemployed (Aguilera, 2002; p. 871). Consequently, how weak ties operate among people in poverty is relatively unknown.
In sum, research shows that people in poverty often have bonding social capital that, however, lacks bridges to other networks: it constrains upward mobility, not facilitate it. The concept “bridging,” in particular, remains unexamined (Leonard & Onyx, 2003; p. 191). Since bridging is of more importance than bonding to get ahead, I want to focus on the weak ties. Whether the respondents either cannot make use of their weak ties, or do not have any, in either case, it might contribute to poverty perpetuation. The respondents seem not to possess any weak ties. However, is this the case?

6.3. Methods and perspective

The interviewers collected the names of the respondents’ friends, family, and acquaintances. The respondents provided many names, and this information was processed in SPSS. An initial examination of the data shows that many respondents said to the interviewers that their social network does consist of friends and acquaintances (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Labor market position and nature of social network

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<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acquaintances (weak ties)</td>
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<td>27.8%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31.8%</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>21.7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mixed (both strong/weak)</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
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<td>Social workers</td>
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Table 6.1 shows the relationship between the nature of social network and the labor market position. The kind of the social network reflects whether a respondents’ social network primarily consist of family, acquaintances or both. It indicates whether the respondents primarily have weak (acquaintances) or strong
(family) ties. At first sight, one third is endowed with the so-called weak ties, and even seventy-four people have a mixed network of acquaintances and family members. Approximately half of all the respondents have some sort of weak ties. A closer look at the table shows that the majority of the respondents who are available for the labor market also possess weak ties (N=36). However, thirteen respondents who are available for the labor market seem to lack these weak ties, but only have family members in their social network. Thus, data shows that people in poverty may have weak ties that might produce social leverage and offer an escape out of poverty. Since they are in a precarious position, I ask why these weak ties seem so unproductive. Why is so little exchanged over these bridges?

Though it seems that they have many friends and acquaintances, the quantitative data obscures what really is exchanged, and what the quality of these relations is. Studying quantitative data on networks, we need to be careful. Quantitative data can scarcely get at the qualitative subtlety of exchange relationships. Gratitude, dependence, loyalty, and deference might serve as items of reciprocation and these are notoriously difficult to measure (Nelson, 2000; p. 293). However, these numbers say little about the quality of the networks. Therefore, I am particularly interested in what is qualitatively going on in the social networks. Furthermore, because policy makers want to boost weak social ties among people in poverty, as a consequence, I have to focus on the exchange between people in poverty and these ties – although in the forthcoming examples I provide also illustrations of bonding ties.

Along these lines, I have to take into account that the social support process is more often characterized as “social exchange” rather than as a one-way provision of care or assistance: social exchange emphasizes that support involves costs as well as benefits to actors who engage in it and that supporters make choices about resource strategies in the context of scarcity (Uehara, 1990; p. 522). The term “social exchange” is generally applied to interactions in which giving and receiving material or intangible resources is, at least, partially predicated on the expectation of return or reciprocity (ibid. p. 523). The principle of reciprocity is essential in understanding the exchange relations, and I use this “give and take” principle as a prism through which I look at the respondents’ social relationships. This will hopefully illuminate the dimensions of the bonds’ quality.
In this manner, I use the social exchange perspective, and analyzed the data in search of examples how respondents dealt with their weak ties (and some strong ties). Because I have no information on how they use their social ties to look for jobs, instead, I focus on how respondents deal with their everyday social bonds. If I identify how they deal with their everyday bonds, I can perhaps deduce why they cannot / do not make use of their weak ties to get ahead.

6.4. Analysis of the data

Reading the interview transcriptions, I concentrated on how the respondents dealt with their weak ties. Inductively, several themes come to the fore about why “not much traffic goes over the bridges.” First, dilemmas of honor and status seem to be of importance: safeguarding social honor, being self-sufficient, and community enforcement are crucial. Second, reciprocity expectations and the work of time are important understanding the gradual disintegration of social relations. Third, risk assessment is significant in understanding social relations. These concepts illustrate how social relationships function.

6.4.1. Dilemmas of honor and status

Karl Polanyi (1944, in Baxter & Margavio, 2000; p. 412) is among those who argue that economic life is typically submerged in social relationships to such an extent that people do not always act to safeguard individual interest in the possession of material goods; instead they act to safeguard social standing and social honor. Applied to this study: although these people under study live in poverty, it does not mean that they want to sell their souls to the devil and want to gain from exchange at all costs. They do not rip off their friends to buy groceries, and do not desire to gain from the personal exchanges as much as possible. This would simply end their social bonds. They, like so, juggle between their moral standards and the opportunity to benefit from the exchanges. Oftentimes, people rather maintain their social honor and reputation, than to profit financially from social exchanges. They want to be known as amiable, and not as a profiteer – although many desperately need money. Even so, sometimes, if people lose from an exchange, they suppress this loss in the face of the other (cf. Bourdieu, 1977a; p. 196)^112. Along these lines, honor and custom are indeed concepts to understand the functioning of exchange relations, and precisely put, this honor might prevent people from making use of their weak ties.
As for honor and dishonor, Brandon, a Dutch man, dislikes receiving money from his friends. He does some chores for them and his friends offer money, but although he needs the money enormously, he refuses. “I helped moving a friend, and then you get something, which I do not like at all. I gave it to my wife, and she puts it in a closet and buys groceries from it. I think, you have to support your friends, you do not have to be paid for it. But factually, you have to accept it. Last week, a fixed a lamp, and then you get some money to buy beer. Then we quarreled: ‘you fool, take the money’ and then I say no. You do not have to pay me for everything. While, I need the money, but I will not take it! I know that’s pathetic [ironically].” In his opinion, doing chores for friends does not have to be repaid. He also does not want to borrow stuff: “I can’t, because I cannot give it back. Many times, they give it [instead of lending it]. I detest that.”

It can also be the other way around. Ashley, a Surinamese single parent borrowed money from a good friend. But at the moment she wanted to give the money back, her friend refused it: “once, I borrowed money from a friend, and at a particular moment I gave it back to him. He was all balled up…my best friend. He said to me ‘are you nuts, paying me back?’ I replied ‘well, you do not name it borrowing, would you?’ Then he said ‘well, I give it to you’.”

Transactions within Rebecca’s social environment are, instead of gaining the maximum amount of profits, characterized by optimizing social standing and honor: “I can get something extra from a friend, but I do not want that. He comes up to me and asks ‘if you need anything, just give me a call’. Then I reply ‘well, I do not need anything’. My daughter is used to the same. She never asks money from others, she only asks me. I taught her to stand on her own feet. I said to her ask no one but me for money. Therefore, you never have to be thankful; you did it on your own. You have to live, but you do not have to live well off. You should help each other, but you should never take advantage of the situation.”

Like this, within Brandon’s social environment, he thinks you should support your friends, without giving and receiving money. Although he desperately needs it, he felt dishonored at the moment they offered him money. Ashley did not have to return it in the first place. She should have showed gratitude, instead of returning the money. The return was different than she expected. The norm in Rebecca’s social environment is self-sufficiency. She rather stands on her own feet. Consequentially, for both partakers honor is decisive in understanding transac-
tions and the norm is that you should do things unconditionally. They try to optimize the quality of their social relations, not to profit from the exchange. However, optimizing the quality of the social relations hinders people in poverty making use of their weak ties in search of a job. For, it gives them the feeling of profiting from their friendships. So, they do not like or want that, since they do not want to be labeled as a profiteer, a selfish person: they are rather self-sufficient.

We saw that honor channels social exchange relations. Individuals also want to act in accordance to other norms\(^{113}\), which are strongly related to honor and status. For instance, there is a general concern of people not to appear too dependent on others (Pahl, 1984; p. 25). For example, Uehara’s research showed that some women were extremely reluctant to mobilize their associates, much preferring to rely on their own resources and to suffer through it (Uehara, 1990; p. 544). The harsh realities of life dictate that a person should stand on his own feet. High value is placed on this norm of self-reliance\(^{114}\) (cf. Nelson, 2000; p. 297). But when people in poverty are fully self-sufficient, it hardly comes to mind to make use of their weak ties. If they are familiar with living on their own, making ends meet without the help of others, it is not part of their custom to make use of their acquaintances.

A young Turkish\(^{251}\) woman illustrates social support within her network. “Interviewer: Do you sometimes receive a present, something nice from your family? Respondent: I do not have such a wealthy family. I would like to have a wealthy family. I have a big family and many acquaintances, but they are down to chili and beans and cannot offer me help. I do not want them to offer me help.” In her social network, social support transactions are only done in time of real poverty. If someone gets bread or some potatoes, that person is in bad shape. People in her environment, also friends, ask her for help, and she cannot offer it. Three processes are going on here. In the first place, she is not poor enough to receive help from her family, so she does not get anything. Second, she does not want to be reminded of her poor position, and avoids being given gifts. This is the reason why she does not like to accept and tries to avoid, as much as possible, being given gifts (cf. Simmel, 1996; p. 47). Third, her social network is low on resources. Therefore, she also cannot obtain anything. Hence, for her it becomes notoriously difficult to make use of weak ties. She probably thinks that her weak ties operate in the same manner – which is probably the case. They almost certainly copy their reciprocity expectations from their strong to their weak ties.
Community enforcement is another element in “dilemmas of honor and status.” Although fragile embedded in a small community, exchanges are oftentimes observed, judged, or disapproved. For example, giving carries with it the obligation to reciprocate, an obligation enforced by community sanctions (Nelson, 2000; p. 291, my emphasis). If members, who are viewed as capable, fail to come forth with support (or fail to reciprocate), what might be the community sanction? One might be that “words spread rapidly throughout the community, and criticism of the offender is likely to come from various members” (Uehara, 1990; p. 540). These often negative “words” are nothing else than gossip. During gossip, via conversations about other people, individuals can disapprove of others’ transactions. Although such discourse can have an integrating function, it serves primarily as a highly effective instrument of rejection (Elias & Scotson, 1994; p. 94). Gossip is thus a powerful sanctioning mechanism, which obstructs people from practicing transactions. It can also hinder people from making use of their weak ties.

One Cape Verdian woman [216] uses a metaphor – the giving of a glass of water – to describe gossip: “In the Netherlands, I have a lot of family and friends ...two aunts. However, I am not in touch with them. I do not want to. Interviewer: at the moment you arrived in the Netherlands, the relationship was good? Respondent: Yeah, the relationship was good, but not anymore. Because sometimes you observe things that are not right. For example, after they gave you a glass of water, everybody must know that you have been given a glass of water. And I do not like that at all. I learned so much. I do not do it anymore.”

One [367] Surinamese woman dislikes gossip intensely. Therefore, she hardly lends and borrows commodities in her social environment: “It is not in my nature to borrow money from people. I try to live without bothering anybody. I have always been independent. I never had the luck to have many friends. It is always the he-said-she-said-bullshit [gossip]. Therefore, I always keep people at a distance. I always talk about nothing.”

Katelyn [348] is a Dutch single parent of two, and she is thirty-five years-old: “I only borrow goods from very close friends. You know, in this neighborhood, people gossip. I prefer to borrow from people who I trust. I hate to borrow goods. I
detest that in the community it is known that I cannot give it back. Suppose that people talk behind my back, and they say that I cannot pay it back.”

In this manner, in the Cape Verdian woman’s community, she knew that her behavior would be observed and gossiped about. She experienced being the subject of gossip at the moment she accepted aid. Because of the gossip, the Surinamese woman kept others at a distance, and Katelyn was a little afraid that others would talk behind her back. They seem to recognize that gossip is one of the constraints on their behavior (cf. Davis, 1969; p. 74; Misztal, 1996; p. 129). To avoid being the talk of the town, they choose to be independent, and because of this independence, for these women, it is probably difficult finding a job via their weak ties. If they start looking for a job, other people might gossip about it and this encumbers them using their bridges to other social networks.

However, according to Misztal (1996; p. 129) the role of honor – as a crucial control mechanism on people’s behavior – is insignificant in the modern urban world. This is clearly not the case. Even in the modern urban world, transactions involving social capital are socially embedded, and cannot be understood without moral considerations. Other cases illustrated that a gift might dishonor a person. By giving money back after borrowing it, can also dishonor the other115. Hence, several mechanisms of reputation are present in the urban environment – a code of ethics (values), conformity to social pressure (in the reciprocity of exchanges) and formal control (sanctioning, monitoring, discipline, and gossiping). If people in poverty are via social mixing provided with more weak ties, they copy these mechanisms of reputation into these new situations, so that these social constraints around reputation might consequentially hinder people in poverty from making use of their fresh weak ties.

6.4.2. Reciprocity expectations and the work of time

Building on the argument that social exchange emphasizes that support involves costs as well as benefits to actors who engage in it (Uehara, 1990; p. 522), social exchange is thus obviously reciprocal. However, if social exchange is reciprocal, this brings about a difficulty: there are no laws to guide the exchange. Without laws, the social exchange between individuals becomes notoriously difficult116. Partakers in the exchange have to rely on trust. They have to trust that they will obtain almost the same amount of goods as they have given. If trust is absent, people might lose from the exchange, or they do not want to be involved in trans-
actions in the first place. At the same time, if trust is entirely absent, how can they make use of their weak ties? The next cases show why trust is essential during the transactions.

Courtney [202], a Cape Verdian woman, gave shelter to illegal immigrants; but now she dislikes having strangers in the house. She believes she did not receive any compensation for helping out others. The others disappeared at the moment they did not need Courtney any longer: “I used to help many people: illegal migrants without food. I gave them shelter, food ... a place to sleep. Interviewer: How did you meet these people? Respondent: Via an acquaintance or they came up to me. ‘I do not have any food today’, they said. But I do not do that anymore. At the moment, you help other people, that’s good, but now they do not care about me. Well, I do not have to be repaid, but they do not pay attention to me, they do not even say hello. They have an attitude.”

Ashley [105] again, a Surinamese single parent, speaks about her relationship with a friend. She looked after her friend’s kids. But when she wanted her friend to baby-sit, her friend did not respond, as she puts it: “A friend, she had two children. I always took care of her children. If I had to do something, she took care of my children. At one moment, I had to go to a funeral, and she was my child-minder. She called me the day before, and asked ‘when do you bring your child’? I said ‘at two in the afternoon’. At the moment I arrived at her house, she was not there. I really did not like that at all. Because sometimes, I am stuck with her kids for three, four days. Her two children and my kid, in my house on my expenses. You never hear me complaining, but the one time I ask her to take care of my children, she is not at home. So far, I didn’t hear anything from her, so I think she already felt trouble... she didn’t take a good decision.”

In the hiatus between the giving and the reciprocation of an item, obligation, trust, and cooperation are ideally created and extended among exchangers (Sahlins, 1965; Mauss, 1966; Gouldner, 1960; in: Uehara, 1990; p. 524)117. This is often not the case, however, the cases of Ashley and Courtney made clear that they expected some sort of return in the future. They invested in social relationships and expected that their friends were willing to help them out or show their gratitude, which clearly did not happen. In the end, their social capital gradually disintegrated. Moreover, in the future, they will probably be more careful with whom they will start an exchange relationship. It became clear that others could abuse
their trust. It seems that although exchange relations are bonding, these relations also include a risk of non-reciprocation. The time-interval enables others to abuse the exchange. Many authors addressed the work of time (Bourdieu, 1990; p. 98). For example, Sykes (2005; p. 114) writes: “the timing of the gift changes everything about human exchanges because it makes people reflect and act upon their reflections. What people understand about the gift changes as they reflect upon it, and in turn changes the way they create their relationships with each other. The timing of the gift alters the power as it is played out in human relationships.” Subsequently, others strategize and might reciprocate with a good of a lesser value.

At the end of the month, many run out of money, and if a neighbor chips in, they can make it. Therefore, the respondents exchange goods to make ends meet. The moral obligation to give and receive, which characterizes the reciprocal relation, produces a bond. The time interval, between gift and response, intensifies the bond. Megan [140], a 48 years-old single parent, experienced the work of time. She starts with her general idea on social relations: “I’m too honest. They take advantage of it. If you give something, that’s good, if not, you can drop dead. I experienced that. I withdrew from everybody. Everywhere in the street. I only say hello.” And she hands over an example: “My mother gave me some money. She [her neighbor] was in despair, so I went to the bank and gave it to her. It took three years before I got the entire sum of money back. She borrowed three thousand from me. If I lent money to somebody, I’d like to have it back within a week.” Megan’s transaction concerned an uncertain time horizon: she had to wait for years for the response, while she expected to get the money back within a week.

If money is borrowed, the benefactor can ask for it back, at any moment. The interval between donation and repayment is sometimes difficult to pinpoint. Some transactions involve a fuzzy interval, and to avoid a fuzzy interval – and thus uncertainty – people can opt for transactions with a clear time interval. A 32 years-old Turk [270] borrows moneys from his family, instead, of his friends, “Interviewer: if you borrow money from your family, do you always have to pay it back? Respondent: I do not have to pay it back to my parents, but to my brother or my sister I have to. Interviewer: but do you borrow from many different people? Respondent: no, not always. If I have to borrow a large amount of money, I ask my family and nobody else. Because I can pay it back to my family soon after.
With reference to my friends, it is different. If they want the money back, they want it immediately. So, I do not ask them.” A 31 years-old Turkish man elucidates this process. The outcome of the transactions’ sequence is known beforehand and so that he has full information. “If I need something, I wait until I can buy it. But sometimes I cannot get by...I cannot buy groceries. Then I ask one of my brothers if he can lend me some. Interviewer: do you have to give it back? Respondent: yes, but only on my conditions. I do not have to pay it back within a certain amount of time.” From his viewpoint, he can trust his brothers who have a good reputation. Reputation helps him to manage the complexity of social life by singling out trustworthy people – in whose interest it is to meet promises: reputation also facilitates reliability of social surroundings by helping him to decide whom he can empower to act in his interest (cf. Misztal, 1996; p. 121).

These cases made clear that repayment is not always forthcoming, not even in the form of gratitude. In consequence of the time-interval between giving and receiving, the other partaker abused the situation. The respondents got disappointed, because the expectations did not come true, and as a result, bonds collapsed. For example, Megan initially trusts in future actions of others. However, her transactional experiences confirmed the supposition that others were able to take advantage of the situation. After that, Megan withdrew from everything. Her conclusion was that a transaction means giving much but finally receiving less. Because transactions involving social capital tend to be characterized by the possible violation of reciprocity expectations (cf. Portes, 1998), these can be violated only because a time interval between donation and response occurs. If an individual makes a donation, the recipient can decide to respond with a good of lesser value. The time interval enables the other to abuse the transaction, and the donator stays in the dark about the content of the response. Exchanges presuppose an improvisation and a constant uncertainty, which remains as to the outcome of the interaction until the whole sequence is completed (Bourdieu, 1990; p. 99). Moreover, trust is vital to understand social exchange, and they often only trust their family. Consequentially, people choose their family to exchange goods, and they instinctively turn to them (bonding ties) for help. Even so, due to of the transaction’s uncertainty, people in poverty probably make only slight use of their weak ties.

6.4.3. Risk assessment

“My experience: if you give something, that’s good. If not, you can drop dead”, Megan said. Having evaluated her past transactions, she concluded that she has to
be more careful in the future, consequently transforming her own values relationally. She and others do not want to be passive victims of bad transactions in the future. By drawing their own boundaries, they become more careful with whom they will be involved in transactions. In order to handle the uncertainty of reciprocal relations, they create their own “rules of engagement.” Therefore, individuals employ several practices to deal with uncertainty. First, some create standards; only if the mutual obligation is clear in advance will the transaction take place. Second, they become more careful with whom to associate; credibility is central. Only people they can rely on are part of their transactions. If people in poverty want to make use of their weak ties, they have to take a risk. However, if the transactions are risky, nothing will be exchanged.

To maintain their dignity and to avoid losses, they do not want to be involved in every transaction. They are careful. A 40 years-old Turkish woman knows exactly what the general norm of reciprocity is; the gift is less then the response, or “a present is a hen and the response is a camel” (Bourdieu, 1977a; p. 198 n7). Interviewer: “do you ask help from family or friends? Respondent: No, I do chores for friends, so I can earn a little money. You do not get anything free these days. You know, when you ask for a nickel, they ask two nickels back.”

A 38 years-old couple, Edgar and Angelica, experienced that their expectations were disappointed. Because motives are unknown, the responses of others are often unpredictable, thus the outcome of lengthy chains of interactions are uncertain (Cheat, 1996; p. 91). Edgar and Angelica always supported their neighbor, but at the moment their income declined, their neighbor did not respond: “Well, I think it is difficult to accept something. We never really had to. To be clear, everybody came up to us...’can you lend me something’. You can hardly imagine. Our doors were always open. The entire neighborhood dropped in.... if others had a problem. So, we were used to this situation...and then, you have to...[find support because their income dropped]...and that is terrible. Well, now it is the other way around. Our upstairs neighbor, I guarantee you, many times she borrowed money from us. She paid everything back on time. Moreover, at a certain moment, we were flat-busted. We did not have a nickel. And she came over, proudly. She won one thousand in the bingo. So, we looked at each other and said; ‘well, now, can you lend us a hundred?’ No, she could not! Well, we said to each other, now it is over. Never, never again! She will never receive a nickel from us! And be honest, do not say you just won the bingo. Go upstairs and
do not say anything, or lend me the hundred. It was not possible. We did so much
for her...year after year. Having a hard time, we did not expect that. That is
shitty.”

Joshua [136], a 40 years-old man, has in the past been snitched on. He worked on
the side and people in his neighborhood betrayed him. For that reason, he is more
careful with whom he associates. Interviewer: “The manner in which people in-
teract with you, has that been changed? Joshua: with some people, yah it has
been changed. Interviewer: did you become more critical? Joshua: I’m not really
suspicious, but with some people, I am more careful. Interviewer: how come?
Joshua: Because of the cock-and-bull stories. Interviewer: Also because they
snitched on you [people snitched on him because he worked on the side]? Re-
spondent: Yah, that also, you have to be careful to whom you talk to. People envy
each other.”

Transactions do change as a result of experiences. Alexis [329], a 41 years-old
single parent received help from her friends, but only under their conditions. She
evaluated her past transactions and concluded that in the future the transactions
will be under her conditions. She wants control over her own social life. “I de-
pend on my friends and acquaintances. I am trying to change that. My friends
want to help me, but only on their terms. A friend said two weeks ago ‘I drive to
your house to baby-sit. Then you can go shopping’. She has to baby-sit, that is
quite an offer [ironically]. That is why I am still in touch with my paid bab-
sitter. Then I have control over the situation. Otherwise, I am depending on the
goodwill of my relations. And they are very busy.”

Thus, in case of the Turkish woman, she finally does some chores for her friends.
These transactions are undoubtedly negotiated in advance, and therefore potential
setbacks are excluded. Edgar and Angelica’s situation illustrate how an agent puts
himself in the place of the other. The couple supposed that the neighbor was
aware of a moral obligation. However, the other did not feel obliged. In the fu-
ture, Edgar and Angelica are more careful with whom they deal with. Joshua’s
case make clear that experiences do matter so that individuals do reconstruct their
social environment. Alexis could chose between either depending on her friends’
goodwill or paying for services. She chooses the latter to have control over the
situation.
The aforementioned illustrations made clear that the respondents constructed their own ways to go about getting scarce material goods. They know that nothing is free (and many times the response is more than the gift). The consequence is that transactions only occur if the interval between grant and repayment is unambiguous beforehand; they do not have dealings with all and sundry. When respondents evaluate their past transactions, they reconstruct “the relational contexts within which they are embedded, and in the process transform their own values” (Emirbayer, 1997; p. 309-310). But if people in poverty want to make use of their weak ties, transactions have to be done with people they hardly know. The danger is that people in poverty probably draw upon hard experience to withdraw from the promise of new situations.

6.5. Conclusion: The weakness of weak ties

According to Putnam, “The touchstone of social capital is the principle of generalized reciprocity – I’ll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without even knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favor” (Putnam, 2000; p. 134). In conclusion, I argue that this is not often the case.

The strength-of-weak ties hypothesis suggests that these ties are productive in being bridges to other networks and offer information about jobs. Using these weak ties, people in poverty can end their poverty spell, because they can obtain a job via information from their friends. This chapter focuses on how people in poverty, in general, dealt with their weak ties (and some strong ties), and tried to answer the question as to why these ties seem unproductive. Inductively, several themes emerged. First, honor – guiding the transactions – might prevent people from making use of their weak ties. Some cases illustrated that people in poverty do not want to exploit friends for their own benefit. These respondents prefer instead to optimize the quality of their social bonds. In addition, precisely optimizing the quality of the social relations hinders people in poverty to make use of their weak ties in search of a job. Second, people in poverty are rather self-sufficient, preferring to suffer through it, and stand on their own feet. Therefore, if people in poverty are (or want to be) self-sufficient, it hardly comes to mind to make use of their weak ties – it is outside their modus operandi. Third, because transactions are always reciprocal, it becomes difficult for people in poverty to make use of their weak ties. For, if people in poverty cannot offer anything, they...
have a hard time requesting something. To make use of weak ties, they have to offer something in the first place, which they do not have. They exclude themselves from these reciprocal weak ties. Fourth, because people in poverty often experience gossip in their social networks, and because gossip is a powerful sanctioning mechanism, individuals might oppose to practice transactions. To avoid being the talk of the town, they choose to be independent. Consequentially, they make less use of their weak ties. Fifth, trust is often absent during the transactions. If people in poverty want to make use of their weak ties, transactions have to be done with people they hardly know – because it concerns people outside their immediate social network. They have to take a risk, and if trust is absent, people might lose from the exchange. Moreover, because of this transaction’s uncertainty, people in poverty make hardly use of their weak ties and, as a consequence, nothing will be exchanged. All these arguments suggest that weak ties are not that solid as often suggested.

Two questions were central to this chapter. The first: why is the respondents’ social capital insufficient to get out of poverty? The answer: Portes argues that transactions involving social capital “tend to be characterized by unspecified obligations, uncertain time horizons, and the possible violation of reciprocity expectations” (Portes, 1998; p. 4). The second question: is boosting social capital among people in poverty an adequate policy intervention to lessen poverty? It seems that for poor people weak ties do not have a great deal of strength. Therefore, we have to rethink the strength of weak ties hypothesis; these weak ties might be powerful for people in high-quality positions, but for people in poverty they seem to be weak.

Nevertheless, if people in poverty do have sufficient social bridges to the labor market, it still offers no guarantee of getting a job. Despite their social capital, people in poverty still face many institutional barriers, conversion obstacles, the poverty trap (see chapter 3), have a troubled relationship with welfare officials (see chapter 4), and live in a stigmatized area (see chapter 5). These obstacles (experienced or real) make it difficult to enter the labor market, whether or not they have this social capital. If the market malfunctions, social capital is offside. At last, compared to the other social fields, with reference to their social networks, people in poverty have relatively much space to manoeuvre: they can choose with whom they want to cooperate. Alternatively, humans use instruments to refine and reconstruct those portions of “reality” that they do not find satisfac-
tory (i.e. violation of reciprocity expectations). They very often exclude themselves from their own social networks. They are reflexive, that is, constantly evaluating the transactions’ desirability. They can decide to call it a day, stop trying and withdraw (cf. Bauman, 1990; p. 100).
Notes

101 Social capital is a very cheap way to solve many social problems: policy makers seek less costly, non-economic solutions to social problems (cf. Portes, 1998; p. 3).

102 Coleman (1990; p. 310) speaks literally about an insurance policy: “creating obligations by doing favors can constitute a kind of insurance policy for which premiums are paid in inexpensive currency and the benefit arrives as valuable currency. There may easily be a positive expected profit.”

103 According to Boggs (2001; p. 282) it is conceptually flawed and historically misleading and the explanatory framework rests upon a foundation of pseudo empiricism (2001; p. 290). Portes (1998; p. 19) points at a class bias and elitist stance in Putman’s thesis. Social capital is so stretched that “the heuristic value of the concept suffers, as it risks becoming synonymous with each and all things that are positive or desirable in social life” (Portes & Landolt, 2000; p. 535).

104 At the aggregate level, gentrification is defined as a simultaneous upward shift of the socio-economic status of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood and the physical improvement of its built environment. At the individual level, gentrification entails the improvement of a dwelling by a household with a higher social status than the occupants in its unimproved state (Smets & van Weesep, 1995; p. 353).

105 He continuously writes that the functioning of the so-called weak ties is bound to remain elusive: “We have a fairly good idea of how interpersonal ties affect life chances in some areas such as finding a job, raising capital to start small business, hiring and retaining workers, migrating or gaining basic subsistence (Granovetter, 1974; Light, 1974; Marks, 1989; Portes & Stepick, 1993), and how the structure of interorganizational ties affects processes of allocation and competition (White, 1981; Burt, 1992). We know much less about how the organizational ecology of a neighborhood, that is the demography, density, type, goals, and routine practices of the organizations that reside within a given locale – affects the lives of the residents and the struggle among them for various social goods and positions” (Wacquant, 1998; p. 28).

106 Bonding social ties are often constraining. For example, “family ties bind, but sometimes these bonds constrain rather than facilitate particular outcomes” (Rumbaut, 1977; p. 39). Certain conflicts arising from efforts to advance beyond one’s social support networks may loom (Domínguez & Watkins, 2003; p. 131).

107 Informal contacts with friends or relatives can effect the matching of workers to jobs by providing information and/or influence (Granovetter, 1974; Lin, 1999; Marsden & Hurlbert, 1988, in Mouw, 2003; p. 869).

108 Perhaps is important not to draw too sharp a distinction between bonding social ties and bridging links. It is true that people often choose their engagement in associations and other lose ties, whereas they do not choose their families. People tend to develop bridging ties on the basis of an existing interest of preference; they seek out others who share the same concerns, and may start joining associations that bring them together. Bonding ties, on the other hand, include some connections that are not entirely a matter of choice. Whether or not one decides to break with family members whose values and behavior seem offensive or damaging is at best a constrained choice, even in the most mobile and flexible social system. But is important not to overestimate the degree of choice in people’s bridging links, not to underestimate the degree of choice involved in bonding ties (cf. Field, 2003; p. 89).

109 Brisson and Usher (2005) demonstrate that participation, homeownership, and neighborhood stability are associated with bonding social capital. Additionally, significant interactions exist between individual and neighborhood income on bonding social capital.
The amount of social support is dissimilar for those living in poverty. Hogan et al. (1993) found that while unmarried mothers more often receive support from their parents than do their married peers, less than half of the single mothers receive significant amounts of such support and that parents in poverty are significantly less likely than persons with higher incomes to be involved in either the giving or the receiving of support (cf. Nelson, 2000; p. 292).

Again, this study is also criticized: “Better together is an uncritical commendation of community building as the key means for effecting social change” (Mowbray, 2005; p. 461).

For example Bourdieu wrote: “The (exploited) peasant treats his (exploiter) khammes as an associate, because that is the custom and because honor requires him to do so” (Bourdieu, 1977a; p. 196). And Baxter & Margavio (2000, p. 400) wrote “The fact and social grace required to maintain ‘face’ and uphold honor codes make unequal economic exchange appear in the acceptable form of reciprocal relations.”

“Social norms are generally unwritten, commonly understood formula for both determining what patterns of behavior are expected in a given social context and, for defining what forms of behavior are valued or socially approved” (Leonard & Onyx 2003; p. 192).

Coleman (1988; p. 117) writes about this: “If the first individual can satisfy his need through self-sufficiency, or through aid from some official source without incurring an obligation, he will do so—and thus fail to add to the social capital outstanding in the community.”

In the words of Coleman (1990; p. 310), I observed a struggle between a people wanting to do a favor for another and the other not wanting to have the favor done for him or a struggle between a person attempting to repay a favor and his creditor attempting to prevent repayment.


Eriksen writes (1995; p. 182); “People keep relationships by remembering their obligations to give to another: in giving gifts I remember that I have a relationship with you.”

Bourdieu (1977a; p. 6) writes; “to abolish the interval is also to abolish strategy.”

Coleman (1990; p. 310) writes; “a person may attempt to relieve himself of an obligation at a time he chooses (that is, when repaying the favor costs him little), rather then when the donor is in need, because the call for his services may come at an inconvenient time.”

Blau (1986; p. 143) writes: “expectations of social rewards are based on the past social experience of individuals and on the reference standards they have acquired, partly as the result of the benefits they themselves have obtained in the past and partly as the result of learning what benefits others in comparable situations obtain.”