

# Disposable Ties and the Urban Poor<sup>1</sup>

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Sociologists long have observed that the urban poor rely on kinship networks to survive economic destitution. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among evicted tenants in high-poverty neighborhoods, this article presents a new explanation for urban survival, one that emphasizes the importance of disposable ties formed between strangers. To meet their most pressing needs, evicted families often relied more on new acquaintances than on kin. Disposable ties facilitated the flow of various resources, but often bonds were brittle and fleeting. The strategy of forming, using, and burning disposable ties allowed families caught in desperate situations to make it from one day to the next, but it also bred instability and fostered misgivings among peers.

How do the urban poor survive? When they obtain basic necessities, such as food and clothing, shelter and safety, how is it that they do so? And

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how do they endure common crises, such as eviction, job loss, the incarceration of a breadwinner, or the death of a family member? Sociologists long have considered these questions—as did Engels ([1845] 1892) in Manchester and Booth ([1902–4] 1970) in London—many observing that to get by destitute families supplement their incomes by relying on robust kinship networks. In the American context, this explanation was articulated by Du Bois in *The Philadelphia Negro* ([1899] 1996); was extended by Drake and Cayton (1945) in their ambitious study of Chicago's Black Metropolis; was supported by ethnographic accounts of working-class white ethnic communities (Kornblum 1974; Gans 1982); and was given its fullest and most careful treatment by Stack (1974) in *All Our Kin*. Documenting “extensive networks of kin and friends supporting [and] reinforcing each other—devising schemes for self-help, strategies for survival in a community of severe economic deprivation”—Stack found that poor black families immersed themselves “in a circle of kinfolk who help[ed] them” (pp. 28, 29). Recently, however, a number of studies have questioned the saliency of kin support today. Low-income families, researchers have found, are embedded in relatively small and dense networks and live in communities infused not with a spirit of solidarity and mutual cooperation but with a mood of distrust and noncooperation (e.g., Hartigan 1999; Smith 2007; Miller-Cribbs and Farber 2008). But an alternative explanation to Stack's, one that describes how the poor survive if not by relying on mutual support among family members, has yet to be developed.

To better understand some survival strategies of the urban poor, I conducted a yearlong ethnographic study, living in two low-income Milwaukee neighborhoods—a majority-white trailer park and a majority-black inner-city neighborhood—and following tenants evicted from their apartments. By allowing me to evaluate the degree to which tenants experiencing a crisis depended on their family and friends, eviction provided a unique occasion to study the structures of poor people's networks and to evaluate how those networks helped families in times of need. I found that, after being evicted, tenants often did rely on relatives for some kind of assistance; however, they also confronted a number of impediments when seeking aid from kin. As a result, to meet their most pressing needs, evicted tenants often relied more on *disposable ties* formed with new acquaintances than on a stable network of reliable kin. They established new ties quickly and accelerated their intimacy. Virtual strangers became roommates and “sisters.” Once a disposable tie was formed, all kinds of resources flowed through it. But these bonds often were brittle and fleeting, lasting only for short bursts. This strategy of forming, using, and burning disposable ties allowed families caught in a desperate situation to make it from one day to the next, but it also bred instability and

fostered misgivings between peers. The findings of this study hold several implications for our understanding of survival strategies and network dynamics among the urban poor.

#### KIN SUPPORT AND ITS CRITICS

Stack (1974) emerged from her fieldwork in the Flats, the poorest section of the black community in an unnamed midwestern city, with reams of ethnographic data documenting how kinfolk helped one another survive. “People in the Flats are immersed in a domestic web of a large number of kin and friends whom they can count on,” she wrote. Those entwined in such a web “exchange various objects generously” and continuously, swapping goods and services on a daily basis (pp. 93, 33). These exchange networks did little to lift families out of poverty—Stack was clear-eyed about the smothering aspects of domestic ties—but they were enough to keep them afloat. A potent ethic of reciprocity and mutual obligation infused the Flats, facilitating the reproduction of reciprocal kin networks. “In contrast to the middle-class ethic of individualism and competition, the poor living in the Flats do not turn anyone down when they need help. . . . This powerful obligation to exchange is a profoundly creative adaptation to poverty” (p. 43). This obligation extended from day-to-day struggles to more severe crises, such as deaths and evictions.

Since their publication, *All Our Kin*'s findings have been supported by a number of studies, including those that have expanded their scope beyond the black poor (e.g., Hogan, Hao, and Parish 1990; Nelson 2000; Domínguez and Watkins 2003). After interviewing 379 low-income white, black, and Hispanic single mothers, Edin and Lein (1997, p. 49) found that many of those on welfare “managed to keep themselves and their families safe by affiliating only with a small group of trusted family members and friends with whom they shared their resources.” And Newman's (1999) ethnography of Harlem's working poor reported that “many inner-city families, especially the majority who work to support themselves, maintain . . . close links with one another, preserving a form of social capital that has all but disappeared in many an American suburb” (p. 194).

However, an outpouring of research has cast doubt on the saliency of kin support among today's urban poor, and the black urban poor in particular. For Patterson (1998), there is a remarkable (and ironic) incongruence between the idealization of strong African-American kinship ties and the reality of such ties, a misinterpretation he refers to as “the myth of the hood.” “The best available evidence,” he writes in reference to the General Social Survey, “indicates [that blacks do not] have higher in-

volvement with their kinsmen and their communities . . . [and that] the networks of Afro-Americans [are] striking for the low proportion of ties that [are] kinsmen” (pp. 162, 152). Another study, based on 105 interviews, has described the relationships between employed and unemployed black peers and family members as “characterized by a pervasive distrust that deterred cooperation,” owing in no small part to the fact that the former could sully their reputation by vouching for the latter (Smith 2007, p. 3; see also Elliott and Sims 2001). While some survey- and interview-based research suggests that whites receive more kin support than nonwhites (e.g., Roschelle 1997; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004), ethnographers have found that poor whites often form tenuous bonds with their kinsmen or are estranged from their family (Hartigan 1999, p. 105; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009, pp. 118, 184).

Given the mounting evidence against the saliency of kin support among the urban poor in general and poor black city dwellers in particular, should we begin treating *All Our Kin* as a work of history, as a record of the way things might once have been? (See Hogan, Eggebeen, and Clogg 1993, p. 1454.) Although recent studies have generated a healthy amount of skepticism about the efficacy and prevalence of kin support in poor communities, a legitimate alternative explanation to Stack’s has yet to be presented. Analysts unconvinced by the kin support argument remove aunts, mothers, and cousins from the picture but furnish in their place no substitute. What remains is the abandoned individual, left to face the miseries of poverty alone. In *Behind Ghetto Walls* (1970), Rainwater puts it plainly: “People in Pruitt-Igoe [a predominantly black public housing project in St. Louis] are continually confronting isolation as an alternative to the risk of trouble that comes from full participation in relationships with relatives and friends” (p. 73; see also Smith 2007, p. 101). Ground-level accounts of poor whites have reached similar conclusions. As Howell writes in *Hard Living on Clay Street* (1973), an insightful ethnography of a low-income white community in Washington, D.C., “few [families] felt they had roots anywhere. . . . Most people called themselves ‘loners’” (pp. 264, 340) and stayed to themselves. There are no stations, then, between kin support and raw individualism, embeddedness and isolation. If kin support has been eroded in poor neighborhoods, then their residents must learn to get by on their own.

Yet all the evidence indicates that this is next to impossible. The unemployment rolls in poor neighborhoods teem with thousands, and what those fortunate enough to be employed earn as janitors or security guards or McDonald’s employees cannot accurately be called “a living” (Newman 1999; Ehrenreich 2001). The majority of those employed in the underground economy as sex workers, drug dealers, and hustlers of all hues hardly fare better. Many fare worse (Bourgois 1995; Levitt and Venkatesh

2000). And the vast majority of single mothers simply cannot survive on welfare alone. Edin and Lein (1997) effectively have demonstrated that, on average, welfare, food stamps, and supplemental security income payments cover only about three-fifths of welfare mothers' expenses. Even after attempting to make up the difference by working side jobs, relying on family members, and seeking help from agencies, many mothers endure severe levels of material hardship: going hungry, forgoing winter clothing and medical care, living in overcrowded apartments with serious housing problems, and experiencing eviction. What is more, since Stack carried out her fieldwork 40 years ago, poor neighborhoods have slid from bad to worse. Recent decades have witnessed a massive retrenchment of public assistance to the needy and the usurpation of welfare policies by market fundamentalism (Steensland 2008; Wacquant 2008). Welfare was declared a failure and reformed, pushing many single mothers into low-wage work and increasing their material hardship (Hays 2003; Handler and Hasenfeld 2007). City planners walked away from public housing around 1975 and initiated a new age of the eviction notice and wrecking ball, even as housing costs climbed by sizable proportions (Goetz 1993; Briggs 2005). All this coincided with the prison boom, which has greatly increased the risk of incarceration for poor men, and poor black men in particular. When Stack conducted her research in the late 1960s, a young black man who dropped out of high school had a 17% chance of serving time in prison. Today, he has a 60% chance (Western 2006).

If conditions have become decidedly worse for the urban poor since midcentury, how do they endure conditions of severe economic deprivation if doing so single-handedly is virtually impossible and if their kin are no longer a sufficient source of support? As my findings suggest, poor families often relied on "disposable ties" to meet basic needs. Two substantive sections follow a discussion of my fieldwork. The first explores several barriers evicted tenants confronted when seeking aid from kin. The second details how tenants formed, used, and discarded disposable ties. With respect to the core argument of this article, I found that the similarities of white and black tenants far outweighed the differences. I have relegated some observations of those differences to the discussion section. There, I also theorize the concept of disposable ties explicitly, especially as it relates to Granovetter's (1973) well-known writings on weak ties.

FIELDWORK

From May to September 2008, I rented a trailer at Green Street Mobile Home Park,<sup>2</sup> a very poor, predominantly white trailer court in Milwaukee. Immediately after that, from October 2008 to June 2009, I moved into a rooming house in the city's impoverished black ghetto.<sup>3</sup> During this time, I conducted in-depth fieldwork five days a week during the average week, spending all day and much of the evening observing and participating in people's everyday lives.

At least since the publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Wilson 1987), much research on urban poverty has focused exclusively on the black poor and the plight of the central city—so much so that “the urban poor” and “the black poor” often are used interchangeably—despite the fact that most poor Americans living in metropolitan areas are white (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2010). The multisited design of the ethnography was chosen not only to facilitate meaningful comparisons between white and black families but also to expand conventional conceptions of urban poverty beyond the black inner city.<sup>4</sup>

Although poor white families can be found throughout Milwaukee's far south side, the trailer park was an ideal ethnographic site because it concentrated (white) poverty in a way that mirrored the (black) inner-city neighborhoods clustered on the city's north side. I established relationships with several families in both neighborhoods, some of whom were going through an eviction. Eleven eviction cases became the ones I followed most closely and analyzed most completely (see table 1).<sup>5</sup> They involved Teddy, 52, a white, half-paralyzed man who received disability; his roommate, Scott, 39, an unemployed single white man addicted to heroin; Lorraine, 54, a white woman with two adult children who received disability; Pam and Ned, 32 and 41 (respectively), a white couple who together raised five children by working side jobs for cash; Tina, 40, a white single mother of three who answered phones for a landscaping

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Since moving from Milwaukee, I have returned regularly and have kept in close contact with many families I met during my fieldwork. In the modern era of mobile phones, e-mail, and air travel, one often does not “leave the field” as much as graduate gradually to another phase of the ethnographic process, that of transcribing, analyzing, and writing. Today, leaving the field is less a cutting oneself off than a splitting oneself into several different pieces and scattering them across an increasingly flat world.

<sup>4</sup> To avoid spreading myself too thin, I did not conduct fieldwork among immigrants or poor Latinos (see Menjivar 2000; Smith 2006). Outside the (North) American context, Auyero's (2001) work in Argentina and Lomnitz's (1977) work in Mexico directly analyze survival strategies among low-income families.

<sup>5</sup> Cases were selected to maximize ethnographic depth while increasing variation along the lines of race, gender, age, employment status, and family type as well as with respect to eviction experience.

## Disposable Ties and the Urban Poor

TABLE 1  
EVICTED TENANTS

Name	Age	Race	Children	Primary Income Source
Trailer park:				
Teddy .....	52	White	0	Disability
Scott .....	39	White	0	Side jobs
Lorraine ....	54	White	2	Disability
Pam* .....	32	White	5	Side jobs
Ned* .....	41	White	5	Side jobs
Tina .....	40	White	3	Part-time work
Inner city:				
Crystal .....	19	Black	0	Disability
Arleen .....	38	Black	6	Welfare
Lamar .....	48	Black	2	Disability
Chester† ....	33	Black	2	Welfare
Myesha† ....	33	Black	2	Side jobs
Vanetta .....	21	Black	3	Welfare
Doreen‡ ....	44	Black	4	Disability
Patrice‡ ....	24	Black	3	Part-time work
Natasha‡ ...	19	Black	1	Welfare

NOTE.—Identical symbols next to names indicate the same household.

company during the spring and summer (receiving unemployment the rest of the year); Crystal, 19, a black woman who received disability; Arleen, 38, a black woman and single mother of six who received welfare; Lamar, 48, a wheelchair-bound black man and single father of two who received welfare; Chester and Myesha, an African-American couple (both 33) who supported two teenage children off Myesha's welfare check and side jobs Chester picked up; Vanetta, 21, a black single mother raising three kids on welfare; and the Hinkstons, an African-American family steered by Doreen, 44, a single mother of four who received disability, and by her two adult children: Patrice, 24, a single mother of three who worked part-time at Cousins Subs, and Natasha, 19, a single mother of one who received welfare.<sup>6</sup> The white tenants were evicted from the trailer park, the black tenants from inner-city neighborhoods.

I met tenants evicted from the trailer park by virtue of being neighbors. I met Arleen, Lamar, and the Hinkstons through their landlord, Crystal through Arleen, and Vanetta through Crystal. I met Chester on the street. I met Tina, Lamar, Crystal, and the Hinkstons before they received eviction notices, Vanetta at a homeless shelter after she had been evicted, and the remaining tenants in the early stages of their eviction process. (Some were evicted multiple times during my fieldwork.) I began spending day

<sup>6</sup> Of the single mothers I met, only Natasha and Tina received regular support from their children's fathers. Lamar did not receive support from his sons' mother.

after day with these tenants. Each day, I decided where to go and with whom to spend time on the basis of the intensity or importance of the day's action, giving more weight to events I expected to yield the biggest analytic payout (e.g., eviction court, moving). I sat beside families at eviction court; helped them move; followed them into shelters and abandoned houses; watched their children; ate with them; slept at their houses; attended church, counseling sessions, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and Child Protective Services appointments with them; joined them at births and funerals; and generally embedded myself as deeply as possible into their lives. I followed two families beyond Milwaukee, traveling to Texas with one, to Iowa with another. Along the way, I met tenants' family members, friends, lovers and ex-lovers, pastors, caseworkers, and dope suppliers. I began talking and spending time with many of these people as well. Not only did this approach allow me to explore social support and network dynamics from multiple vantage points, but it also permitted me to double- and triple-check the accuracy of what one actor told me with the observations and statements of others—a technique that bolstered the validity of my data.

Most of the time, I carried a digital recorder in the field so as to allow me to capture the details and nuances of the interactions I observed. At all times, I carried a notepad and wrote down observations and conversations. In the evenings, I would transfer jottings from my notebooks to the computer and would write about the day's events. Not long after beginning my fieldwork, I began paying close attention to whom tenants relied on for help. I analyzed these observations during and after my fieldwork. I did not rely on any qualitative data software. Rather, guided by the set of research questions that opened this article, I began listening to hundreds of hours of recorded interactions and poring over thousands of pages of field notes, reading and rereading, until, having become intimate with my data, the observations on which this essay's argument rests emerged and cohered.

During everyday conversation, people in the trailer park and the inner city claimed to have no friends or an abundance of them, to be surrounded by supportive kinsmen or estranged from them. Oftentimes, depending on their mood, their accounts of social ties and support varied widely from one day to the next. I came to view these accounts skeptically, interpreting them as a kind of data in their own right but not as accurate evaluations of people's social relationships (cf. Liebow 1967, p. 144). Network analysts have demonstrated that respondents' accounts of their personal ties tend to be highly inaccurate (see Freeman, Romney, and Freeman 1987; Marsden 1990). Studies comparing survey data on social networks with data gathered by other means have concluded that the former rarely align with the latter, leaving one research team to conclude

that “people do not know, with any acceptable accuracy, to whom they talk over any given period of time” (Bernard, Killworth, and Sailer 1981, p. 15). Problems arise not only when determining *who* is in one’s network but also when asking what those people *do*—and what one does for them (Ferligoj and Hlebec 1999). If giving increases one’s sense of self-worth and receiving diminishes it—ladling soup at the Salvation Army evokes a very different feeling than having it ladled into one’s bowl—then we would have good reason to expect respondents to overestimate the amount of support they give and underestimate the amount they receive. It is often the case, therefore, that statements about social support reveal more about the public persona one wishes to maintain than about the nature of the support itself.

Ethnography affords the sociologist the ability to distinguish accounts of action from the action itself (Whyte 1943), and eviction, moreover, provided a unique occasion to analyze social networks. In the aftermath of eviction, I was able to compare what people said about the support they received from friends and family with support they actually received during that difficult hour, recording in detail the inner workings of people’s social networks. Eviction functioned as a moment of truth during which I could closely monitor whom tenants called on for help and how support was extended or withheld. It had a way of quickening ties, testing relationships, and revealing commitments (or the lack thereof), thereby drawing to the surface what often is submerged below the level of observation.

At the same time, however, one might speculate that, by and large, the kin support evicted tenants receive is likely to be decidedly weaker than that received by nonevicted tenants in poor neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> In following evicted families, have I selected on the “worst cases”? Evicted tenants are an especially destitute group, to be sure, but perhaps no more so than other subpopulations of the urban poor: including homeless families or those recently released from prison. It is important to recognize, too, that eviction is quite commonplace in low-income neighborhoods, especially inner-city African-American areas. Analysts have suggested that, nationwide, several million evictions take place each year (Hartman and Robinson 2003). In high-poverty Milwaukee neighborhoods, where more than 40% of the population lives at or below 150% of the poverty line, one renter-occupied household in 14 is evicted through the court system each year. After analyzing court records, I estimated that landlords evict

<sup>7</sup> One could just as reasonably speculate that kin support would be on fullest display during intervals of increased need, such as periods of homelessness following eviction. If family members in fact did not help one another weather the hard times, kin support hardly could be considered an effective means by which the urban poor survive.

roughly 16,000 adults and children from roughly 6,000 Milwaukee apartments in an average year (Desmond 2012). (These figures are quite conservative as they do not count informal evictions that occur beyond the purview of the court.) Eviction, therefore, affects a large segment of the low-income population, not a negligible collection of the poorest of the poor.

Moreover, while some poor families are relatively stable much of the time and some are relatively unstable much of the time, many oscillate between periods of stability and instability, drifting from security to desperation and back again (see Black 2009). Accordingly, to divide the urban poor into a set number of “sharply bounded, internally homogeneous ‘groups’” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 28)—the unstable (who get evicted) and the stable (who do not), “worst cases” and “normal cases,” as it were—would be to misrecognize as permanent and immutable that which is regularly transitory and tenuous. It would be to commit what Elias (1978, p. 112) calls “process-reduction”: “the reduction of processes to static conditions.” Stability and instability, security and desperation: these are not fixed states as much as temporary conditions poor families experience for varying periods of time. Similarly, in many cases it would be somewhat suspect to divide “normal life” in impoverished urban neighborhoods from periods of exigency (such as eviction or incarceration), for the latter frequently characterize the former. People living in disadvantaged neighborhoods, “where social problems gather and fester” (Wacquant 2008, p. 1), often navigate through gnarled thickets of interconnected misfortunes. The murder of a loved one can lead to depression, which can lead to job loss, which can lead to eviction, which can lead to homelessness, which can intensify one’s depression, and so on (see Pleasence et al. 2007). Instead of sorting the urban poor into a handful of preset categories, a more accurate rendering of the incredible diversity among this population may be that of a continuum of stability on which people move back and forth. It might be said that these findings best apply to those “going through a thing,” segments of the urban poor suffering through periods of hardship, owing to eviction or other consequential events (e.g., job loss, relationship dissolution). But these hardships regularly beset many low-income families, for the urban poor today are so destitute, so shorn of public support, they seem always to be “going through a thing.” The lived experience of poverty often is that of confronting one crisis after another.

## EXTENDING AND WITHHOLDING KIN SUPPORT

“When families or individuals in the Flats are evicted, other kinsmen usually take them in,” Stack (1974, p. 91) stated plainly. For some in Milwaukee, this was the case as well. When Teddy was served an eviction notice after paying \$507 for x-rays and a brain scan—he had suffered a near-fatal fall off the 16th Street Viaduct bridge a year before we met and had suffered chronic neck and back problems ever since—his sister, who lived in Tennessee, took him in. Others benefited from kin support as well. After Chester and Myesha were evicted, they went their separate ways: Myesha taking her daughters to Long Beach to live with her mother, Chester heading for San Antonio, where he would sleep on his uncle’s couch in the day and help him peddle crack throughout the night. After Lorraine was evicted, she moved in with her older brother, Beaker, staying there until he relocated a few months later to an assisted-living facility. To make rent, Vanetta participated in a stickup. She was arrested and, later, evicted (and, even later, convicted). After being sentenced to 18 months in prison, Vanetta sent her three children to live with her sister. And Doreen, Patrice, and Natasha Hinkston depended heavily on each other, combining their incomes to meet basic needs. Help arrived in less tangible forms as well. Crystal, who was raised in the foster care system, often called her mother, a former crack addict, for advice. But when she was at her lowest, Crystal dialed her “spiritual mom,” Ms. Shauntell, an older woman who attended her church, breaking into tears as Ms. Shauntell whispered prayers or spoke in tongues over the line. Scott, too, occasionally called his mother, a hospital housekeeper in rural Iowa. Scott tried to hide from her the fact that he was broke and daily plunging a needle into the fat artery of his neck, but sometimes he couldn’t hold it all in. Once, drunk and high, he dialed his mom. “Mom,” he was crying. “I’m sorry. I’m a mess. I’m a fucking mess.”

I did not meet a single evicted tenant who coped with the aftermath of her or his eviction single-handedly, as abandoned individualists, for extended periods of time (cf. Edin and Lein 1997, p. 42). Every tenant I met relied on kinfolk for some kind of assistance. Yet to meet their most pressing needs (e.g., food, shelter, child care), tenants often relied more extensively on disposable ties than on relatives. To better understand why, it is necessary first to explore barriers evicted tenants confronted when seeking aid from kin. When someone solicited help from kinsmen occupying a similar rung on the socioeconomic ladder, she or he confronted a different set of obstacles than when soliciting help from kinsmen a few rungs up. While both the trailer park and the inner city were spatially and socially isolated from Milwaukee’s middle-class neighborhoods, most residents of each area belonged to economically heterogeneous family

networks (cf. Wilson 1987; Rankin and Quane 2000). Scott's older sister spent most of her money on alcohol, while his younger sister spent most of hers on an upcoming wedding and the mortgage for a modest house. Vanetta had a mother in a homeless shelter and a sibling in the suburbs. And although most of Arleen's cousins were down and out, Aunt Merva, having retired as a school counselor, was financially stable. It was Aunt Merva who had paid for Arleen's mother's funeral and who sometimes chipped in so that the gas or lights would be turned back on. Each evicted tenant I met was enveloped, to varying degrees, within a kin network comprising both *lateral ties* (between people occupying relatively similar positions on the socioeconomic ladder) and *vertical ties* (between those occupying qualitatively different positions).

### Barriers to Kin Support: Lateral Ties

At special events, such as hospital visits, funerals, or family reunions, kin support, especially in the black community, appeared alive and vigorous. Roughly a month after Arleen was evicted, her 39-year-old cousin, Terence—everyone just called him “T”—was shot and killed. In a black suit and tie, I picked up Arleen and the two children who lived with her, Jori (age 14) and Jafaris (age 6), and we drove to Pitt's Mortuary. The sanctuary bustled with family members. Teenagers and young women wore personalized shirts with T's face or, disturbingly, the face of another family member who recently was murdered. Young men were dressed in crisp blue t-shirts with matching bandanas. Grandmothers and grandfathers were there in cream or brown suits with matching felt hats. And they all seemed to surround Arleen and her boys with warmth. The most rousing moment in the sermon, the one that garnered the loudest response, was when the preacher boomed, raspy and impassioned, “What has happened to the love amongst us? What has happened to the concern? . . . Can't nobody help us but *us!* . . . We don't need another program, we need to pull our pants up and take back our community out of love and respect, and do it ourselves!” And love and respect were professed again and again by family members. “Arleen like my sister,” Kacee, the mother of one of Arleen's brother's children, told me, slinging her arm around Arleen's neck. “We go way back. I'd do anything for this girl.” Arleen smiled and pitched her head into Kacee's shoulder.

A funeral was perhaps an odd place to beam, but this was exactly what Arleen did. Since her eviction, Arleen usually appeared depressed—and was chronically depressed (officially diagnosed in her teens)—and over-

whelmed by the weight of her circumstances.<sup>8</sup> Although during the wake, funeral, and repast she was visibly distraught and deeply disturbed over T's murder, Arleen also was thrilled to be embraced by the affectionate and knowing arms of kin. Yet I knew inside what Arleen knew: that all this was a bit of a charade, a temporary and maudlin performance of family that would dissipate shortly after T was laid in the ground. Arleen's family members, Kacee included, had tendered little support during and after her eviction. None of them had gone to court with her. None had offered to help her make rent. None had opened their homes to her and her boys. None had offered to help her find another place to live.<sup>9</sup> Since her eviction, Arleen had been staying, not with kin, but at a shelter in Waukesha, a town 18 miles west of Milwaukee. At the funeral, Arleen had allowed herself to enjoy a kind of provisional kin community. The next day, no one was calling. I asked Arleen why all those family members, who had appeared so kind yesterday, had not helped her avoid or cope with her eviction. She frowned at my question but finally replied, "I don't know. They just funny like that. They don't never help me out." Far from extending a helping hand, Arleen's family often was the cause of suffering. T was gunned down not by a rival gang member or by some anonymous stranger but by his own cousin.

Tenants confronted a number of barriers to kin support. In some cases, crucial kin ties simply did not exist. This was the case for people like Crystal, who in their youth passed from one foster home to another. It also was the case for those with absentee or dead relatives. Doreen's mother died when she was four. Arleen's mother, remembered fondly as her best friend, died two years before her eviction. In other cases, kin networks were too resource deprived or troubled to serve as reliable sources of support. (Dysfunction, of course, is not unique to lateral ties.) Pam's father was an alcoholic and recently had been arrested on his fourth DUI charge. And since moving from the Cabrini Green housing projects in Chicago, Vanetta's mother had bounced from one shelter to the next; still homeless, she was in no shape to help Vanetta and her children.

Sometimes, too, structural or legal constraints thwarted kin support. Family members "on paper" (on parole), whose apartments regularly were inspected by parole officers, were hesitant to take in destitute kin. The latter could themselves be on the run from the police (as Ned was) or could be involved in criminal activity—factors that threatened to exac-

<sup>8</sup> Once, after riding in silence with Arleen for several minutes, I asked her what she was thinking about. "How I gonna feed my kids tonight," she answered.

<sup>9</sup> With one exception: months after her eviction, Arleen borrowed \$70 from her brother, a drug dealer, so she could afford a security deposit on an apartment. In the end, the money was used to make daily ends meet.

erbate the parolee's plight (see Goffman 2009). This was why Crystal believed her favorite aunt, Aunt Rhoda, with whom she had lived for five years during her childhood—the longest she had lived with anyone—refused to open her door to her. Aunt Rhoda had “caught a case” for her son, his dope found in her apartment, and was serving two years on parole. Knowing this, Crystal asked if she could sleep outside on her porch. Aunt Rhoda refused the pitiable request.<sup>10</sup> And after Patrice was evicted, she moved in with her mother, Doreen. This irked Doreen's landlord, as three adults and five children living in a modest two-bedroom apartment made for overcrowded conditions. “I can't have all those people living in my apartment like that,” the landlord told me. “I'm gonna evict everybody outta here.” Not long after that, she served Doreen with an eviction notice. One consequence, then, of eviction was a compounding effect that resulted when evicted tenants relied on their poor family members for a place to live, thereby straining the latter's resources and exacerbating their own risk of eviction. In cases such as these, eviction resulted in negative consequences, not only for the evicted tenant but also for those within the tenant's kin network, a cycle that aggravated conditions of urban poverty and punished kin who extended support.

#### Barriers to Kin Support: Vertical Ties

Different barriers presented themselves to tenants seeking support through vertical ties. Tenants were sometimes chastised, infantilized, and turned away when soliciting help from poor kin, but this seemed to happen more often, and more piercingly, after they approached better-off family members (cf. Stack 1974, pp. 77–78; Edin and Lein 1997, p. 189). This was especially the case when the latter grew exhausted by repeated requests for help. Most of Lorraine's middle-class relatives withheld support during her eviction because they felt that she had used them in the past and that she did not make smart financial decisions. When Lorraine's minister contacted her sister, Susan, and told her that Lorraine had “asked for money again” (Susan and Lorraine attended the same church), Susan told him, “I gotta be honest with you. I don't think you should give it to her.” After this happened, I scheduled a haircut with Susan's daughter, Sammy, and we began discussing her aunt's plight. “You see,” Sammy told me, her scissors working, “we don't want our church to just, you know, give Lorraine money. Again. . . . Because my Aunt Lorraine is

<sup>10</sup> Structural and legal constraints of this sort serve as real barriers to kin support, but they also serve as convenient excuses for kin disinclined to help. It is hard to know if Aunt Rhoda was following the rules reluctantly or if she was using those rules to keep her niece at bay.

one of those people who will see, you know, some \$200 beauty cream that removes her wrinkles and go and buy it instead of paying the rent. . . . And I don't know why she's asking the church for money. She was living with Beaker [Lorraine's brother] for all that time and, from what he tells me, she wasn't paying him all the time, either. So, I don't know where all her money was going."<sup>11</sup> Sammy looked up, our eyes meeting in the mirror. "I don't know why she just doesn't stick to a budget." Middle-class kin who felt they had done their bit—after being evicted several years ago, Lorraine lived with Sammy for a brief period—often were unwilling to extend further support. They justified their refusal to help by attributing their relatives' misfortunes to individual failings, such as the inability to budget.

Savvy tenants studied relatives' limits and attempted to approach them without crossing the line. Ties to better-off kin were banked, saved for emergency situations or social mobility opportunities, and many were careful not to overdraw their account. When Arleen rushed Jafaris to the hospital because he was having breathing problems, Aunt Merva agreed to cover his treatment. But just weeks later, Child Protective Services removed Jafaris from Arleen's care after learning that her lights had been cut off. Jafaris could return, the caseworker had said, once the electricity was restored. With a rent of \$600 and a welfare check of \$628, Arleen needed to come up with approximately \$100. I asked her how she was planning to get it. "I'll probably ask my auntie [Aunt Merva]," she replied, her words burdened. "But she just paid for Jafaris's hospital bill last week. So I'm gonna hear about it."

Poor tenants often incurred a psychological cost—a prick to their self-worth, often already in tatters—when they approached better-heeled kinsmen. When they asked for help, often they would "hear about it," and they tired of this. And so, when the next crisis arrived, they often avoided calling on them. The result was that family members in the best position to help usually were not asked to do so. Consider Doreen, the youngest of nine children. Two of her siblings were dead. The remaining were each better off than she was. John was a truck driver. Josephine was married to a police officer. Vanessa worked in a bank. But Doreen did not seek their help during her eviction or the difficult months that followed. When I asked her why, she replied, "They just so . . . ," Doreen paused, searching

<sup>11</sup> A significant portion of Lorraine's \$714 monthly disability check was going to Eagle Moving, the company that locked Lorraine's belongings into bonded storage after her eviction. To prevent her things from being auctioned or junked, Lorraine had paid Eagle Moving \$375 shortly after her eviction, paying \$125 in storage fees every subsequent month. Beaker did not charge Lorraine rent, but he asked her to pay his cable and phone bills. Both bills were in the red. So, one month Lorraine paid \$500 to reinstate the services.

for the word; then, “*successful*. You know? And I don’t wanna get another lecture.”

In some cases, middle-class individuals simply did not know how to help, or they did not exert much thought about it, or they affixed to their support stipulations understood by their low-income kinsmen to be deal breakers. “Mom, I’m a mess,” Scott blurted out over the phone. A partial confession followed, as Scott told his mother about his drinking (but not the heroin) and about losing his nursing license after getting hooked on painkillers. She knew none of it. Up to this point—it was August—Scott had not spoken to his mother since last Christmas and had not seen her in over two years. But before Scott could finish, his mother cut him off, failing to realize, perhaps, that it took quite a lot of determination (and alcohol) for Scott to dial all 10 numbers without hanging up at the seventh or ninth digit, as he usually did. She explained that she was in a van full of relatives and could not talk at the moment. They were all going camping for the weekend. “But, Scott,” she said before hanging up, “you know that you can always come home.”

But Scott knew better. How could he get to Iowa with no car and no money for a train ticket? And how could he find heroin there? After a day, “the sick,” as he called it, would start working its way through his body. Plus, going home and asking for help would be mortifying—those pity-filled eyes of his aunts, cousins, and grandparents—as judgment and shame would cover him like a casing. “I mean, I could go back home,” Scott thought out loud as we walked through a grocery store. “But, damn, I’m 40 fucking years old, and I need to go back home to [town], Iowa? . . . But, then, I’d have to go back and tell them, you know, that I fucked my whole fucking life up.”

Months later, in February, Scott did go home, but just for a two-day visit. I went with him. We stayed with Scott’s mother, visited his grandmother in the nursing home, and played video games with his teenaged nieces. We watched Patty model her new wedding dress. One evening after visiting relatives in a neighboring town, Scott and I drove together back to his mother’s house. He stared silently at the snow-blanketed corn and soybean fields under a half-mooned sky before offering, “Maybe if I stayed here, stayed more grounded, all that addiction stuff never would have took hold.”

“. . . When going through addiction stuff, did you ever reach out to family, try to go home?”

Scott shook his head.

“Why not, you think?”

“Look at ’em.” Scott turned toward me, the corners of his mouth up-ticked. “They wouldn’t know what to do. . . . How much help could they possibly be?”

Scott went on to tell me that after calling his mother and confessing that he was a mess, he called her back the following day, explaining that he was doing better, seeing a counselor, and taking medication.

“So [your mom] doesn’t know what you’re wrestling with. She just knows you’re wrestling with something?” I asked.

“Right.”

“. . . Does she know about the eviction?”

“No.”

Before, during, and after our trip, Scott asked for nothing, choosing instead to let on as though his life was in order, even as it was devolving into a festering mess of drug abuse and homelessness.

### DISPOSABLE TIES

If evicted tenants encountered a number of barriers to kin support, to whom did they turn after being put out of their homes? The answer is that they depended heavily on *disposable ties*. By disposable ties, I mean relations between new acquaintances characterized by accelerated and simulated intimacy, a high amount of physical copresence (time spent together), reciprocal or semireciprocal resource exchange, and (usually) a relatively short life span. Analysts conventionally have conceived of agents connected by strong ties, those between intimates (e.g., best friends, spouses), or by weak ties, those between acquaintances (e.g., coworkers, distant relatives), as exhibiting reciprocal support in proportion to the strength of the tie (Granovetter 1973). More is expected of strong ties, whereas weak ties tend to be used more sparingly (if often with significant rewards, e.g., employment information). But in the poor neighborhoods in which I lived, strong ties often were treated like weak ones, disposable ties like strong ones. Although they may have known one another only for a matter of days, virtual strangers moved in with each other, pooled their money to buy food and furniture, and disciplined each other’s children. Resources necessary for survival were transferred through disposable ties, but in the majority of cases, these relationships were short-lived. How did evicted tenants form disposable ties? How were the ties used? And what mechanisms severed them? The following three subsections take up these questions in turn.

Before I turn to them, however, a brief word of clarification is in order. Many dynamics described below—accelerated and simulated intimacy, rivalry and duplicity between peers—can be observed at all levels of society. The tendency to rely on perfect strangers for emotional comfort, for example, is fairly common among the middle class, as evidenced by the so-called stranger on a plane phenomenon involving a high degree of

self-disclosure between passengers who have known one another only for the duration of the flight (Rubin 1975).<sup>12</sup> In fact, since Adam Smith ([1776] 1991), thinkers have marveled at the interdependence among nonintimates demanded by modern life (Wirth [1938] 1967; Lofland 1973). As one economist (Seabright 2004) has argued, “complex mutual dependence among strangers” is essential to human flourishing, not to mention being “a phenomenon as remarkable and uniquely human as language itself” (pp. 2, 1). It would be misguided, then, to suggest that reliance on disposable ties is particular to poor people. What is particular to poor people is, of course, poverty. Whereas middle- and upper-class people might rely on disposable ties for social advancement, financial transactions, services, sex, and a variety of other things, it is only the poor who routinely rely on disposable ties to meet basic human needs, such as housing and food. This entails placing weighty demands on strangers. Although poor people’s strategy of relying on disposable ties to survive conditions of severe destitution is not different in kind from the tendency of middle-class or wealthy people to rely on strangers, it often is different in degree.

### Forming Ties

How does one go about forming a disposable tie? Answers appear endless. Scott met Mike at a Cocaine Anonymous meeting. Mike introduced Scott to Pito, who introduced him to David, a 19-year-old gang member with whom Scott roomed after his eviction. After Beaker moved into an assisted-living facility, Lorraine asked Betty, an elderly woman whom she barely knew (they met in the trailer park), if she could sleep on her couch. Betty said yes, and Lorraine stayed with her for the better part of a year. Arleen met Trisha after the latter moved into the upper unit of the duplex from which Arleen would be evicted. Arleen would later circle back to that very duplex and live with Trisha for roughly two months. People formed ties in the most pedestrian of places, places one might not expect to be propitious to striking up new relationships. To take but one example: while homeless after her eviction, Crystal met a woman, Patricia, at a bus stop outside a liquor store. They were roommates by the day’s end.

One initially is tempted to concede that the lines of disposable ties form

<sup>12</sup> And have we ethnographers, for that matter, not developed our own methods of meeting strangers, hurrying on the relationship, and participating in exchange relations to collect valuable information only inevitably to distance ourselves from the field and the people we meet there? Who can argue with Venkatesh’s (2002) informants, public housing residents in Chicago’s ghetto, who saw his “own art form, the ethnographic craft, [as] an exemplary ‘hustle’” (p. 98), one not dissimilar to their own dealings in the street economy? “This is the heart of the participant observation method,” Powdermaker (1966, p. 9) once observed: “involvement and detachment.”

no tidy patterns. But a closer look reveals a clear logic behind the seeming disorder and complexity. The environment most conducive to producing disposable ties was that which gathered together people with pressing needs. When Crystal met Patricia, a woman 20 years her senior, Crystal needed a place to stay, and Patricia, who long had been plotting a way to toss out her abusive husband, needed an income to replace his.

Especially in the inner city, strangers daily brushed up against one another. A need meeting a need facilitated the conditions for the formation of a collaborative, if temporary, union. This was why institutions charged with managing the poor, those that brought together people with similar needs, were sites par excellence for the formation of disposable ties. Welfare offices, food pantries, job centers, Alcoholics Anonymous clubs, methadone clinics, even the waiting areas of eviction court—disposable ties regularly were initiated in such venues (cf. Small 2009). Homeless shelters were ideal incubators of disposable ties as they collected under a single roof dozens of people who had found themselves in an especially desperate situation—who were “going through a thing,” as many shelter residents put it. Residents were preoccupied by the same problem, and for many, their modus operandi for securing housing was through a disposable tie. Scott and Teddy met in the Salvation Army shelter before moving into the trailer park. Crystal and Vanetta met in a shelter after each was evicted. Soon, they were looking for an apartment together. At the shelter, Vanetta also met Earl, a man (old enough to be her father) who took a strong romantic interest in her, an interest she entertained in exchange for money intended to help her and her children get back on their feet.

Those searching for a disposable tie have learned how to signal as much to potential “new friends” and, similarly, have learned how to pick up similar signals from others. Many do so, for example, by taking incremental but expedited steps toward establishing a relationship of reciprocity. At the shelter, I noticed Vanetta and Crystal initiate a gift exchange by swapping cigarettes, each keeping mental score of the number of Newports given and received. Soon they upped the ante, exchanging snacks, then small bills, then meals purchased at nearby fast-food restaurants. Through passing references, they began learning about one another’s resources—Vanetta received \$673 a month from welfare, Crystal \$754 from disability—as well as a bit about each other’s character. Soon enough, Crystal and Vanetta were looking for housing together, all the while seeming to test each other’s temperament and commitment to reciprocity. It would not be long before both women’s lives were tethered together in mutual dependence.

Sometimes, decisions about teaming up with a stranger were made in a matter of seconds. Arleen was spending the last few days in her apartment before having to leave when someone knocked on the door. (At

eviction court, a court commissioner had ordered her out but, since there were dependent children in the household, had given her a few extra days to find another place to go.) It was her landlord, showing the apartment to a prospective new tenant: Crystal.<sup>13</sup> The landlord explained that Arleen was being evicted and soon would be moving.

“Where you gonna go?” Crystal asked.

“I don’t know,” Arleen answered. “I mean, I ain’t got nowhere to go.”

A few more words were exchanged, and after Crystal agreed to take the apartment, she told Arleen, “If you want to, you and your kids can stay here until you find a place.”

Arleen looked at her landlord.

“If it’s fine with you, it’s fine with me,” the landlord told Crystal.

Arleen thanked her, and the two women hugged.

A hand had been extended, and before Crystal or her landlord could change their minds, Arleen needed to act quickly, accepting the offer or shaking her head no. Accordingly, she made character judgments about Crystal based on her self-presentation and the few things gleaned from their brief conversation. Arleen noted that Crystal had mentioned attending church, a fact that allowed her to peg Crystal as the “churchgoing (read: ‘decent’) type” (Anderson 1999). And Arleen liked the way Crystal “carried herself.” The day they met, Crystal was wearing a skirt down to her ankles, a tan winter coat, and a pretty silk head wrap. She spoke tenderly and wasn’t “nasty” (i.e., she didn’t smell or wear tattered clothes). Arleen told me that she considered Crystal a safe bet, even if it ultimately was a gamble made under duress.<sup>14</sup>

### Using Ties

Once a disposable tie was formed, all kinds of resources flowed through it. New friends often spent hours together, day after day. They exchanged money, housing, food and food stamps, drugs, sex, bus passes, furniture, and children’s toys. They watched each other’s children, cooked for one another, and exchanged information about employment opportunities and public assistance. Some joined new friends in illicit activities to make

<sup>13</sup> To clarify the timeline of events: Crystal first met Arleen (at Arleen’s apartment), then Vanetta and Earl (at a homeless shelter), then Patricia (at a bus stop). And Arleen first met Crystal, then Trisha, then Silk (whom we meet below).

<sup>14</sup> Because weighty decisions often were made on the basis of scant information—first impressions could lead to consequential outcomes—a smart presentation of the self was particularly important for those in the market for disposable ties. The cleanliness of one’s shoes or the tightness of one’s braids was a promoter of personal dignity as well as an investment in one’s well-being. One searching for help from a new friend must invest in oneself so that others will as well.

ends meet or to gain drug money.<sup>15</sup> Through disposable ties, evicted tenants—who, now bearing the blemish of eviction on their records, were “unrentable” in the eyes of many landlords—often found subsequent housing, their new friend’s name on the lease. If Stack (1974) observed kin carrying out many of the duties that allowed low-income families to survive economic deprivation, I often observed these duties being accomplished through disposable ties.

Ordinarily, one would not allow a stranger to move in with her or to watch her children. One would not exchange a healthy amount of goods, money, and care with a casual acquaintance. So, the stranger or acquaintance was transformed, sometimes overnight, into a “best friend,” “fiancé,” or “sister” (cf. Liebow 1967). The fact that Trisha was a light-skinned woman of Mexican, African-American, and European descent and Arleen was a dark-skinned African-American did not prevent the women from introducing each other as “sisters.” Shortly after meeting at the shelter, Earl began referring to Vanetta by boasting, “That my fiancé right there.” And it was not a day after meeting Patricia at the bus stop that Crystal began calling her “mom.” A virtue carved out of urgent necessity, calling new friends by warm, familial names helped to uphold the illusion that disposable ties were stronger and more established than in actuality. A gloss of fraternity and allegiance now smoothing the ties between people who had decided to “play kin,” resources could be traded more liberally.

Because disposable ties tended to be formed between two people “going through a thing,” pairs experiencing severe levels of material hardship and often psychological trauma, an authentic connection could be sensed between those who, having hit rock bottom, decided to cast their lot with each other. At the very least, acquaintances brought together by poverty recognized that their burdens were not unique. Shortly after Crystal moved in and let Arleen stay, the two began to argue regularly. One such argument culminated in Arleen yelling, “You don’t know what it’s like! You don’t know what I *been* through. You don’t know what it’s like to have your father molest you and your mother not care about it!”

“Oh, yes I do. Yes I *do*!” Crystal yelled back, sitting up. “I know *exactly* what that’s like ’cause my stepfather molested me when I was just a little

<sup>15</sup> Scott met Billy and Susie, trailer park residents who often took trips to Chicago for heroin tar, around the time he was evicted. Together they worked a hustle that helped subsidize their \$20-a-day addictions. Billy would steal something of value from a department store, usually an item of jewelry. Susie would then return the item, acting like a dissatisfied customer who had misplaced her receipt. Because Susie had no receipt, the store manager would give her a gift certificate in exchange for the item. Susie would then hand the gift certificate to Scott, who would peddle it in the parking lot, selling it below value. He might sell an \$80 gift certificate for \$40, taking the \$40 straight to Chicago.

girl, and that's why they sent me to the foster care. I swear to *God* I know exactly what you been through! I swear to *God*."

Although it is impossible to know precisely how Crystal and Arleen felt at that moment, it is reasonable to suggest that, through this exchange, both women experienced a kind of shared comprehension: the consoling recognition of an affinity, the seeing of oneself (and one's past) in another.<sup>16</sup> When disposable ties merged one life history of suffering with another, as they often did, newly formed relationships could be relied on to produce a sense of belonging and, if not comfort, then at least something close to the opposite of estrangement.

Sometimes people relied on several disposable ties simultaneously while attempting to compromise the ties their new acquaintances had formed with others. Vanetta deployed a keen sensitivity and intelligence when balancing her ties with Crystal and Earl. Both vying for Vanetta's companionship (and resources), Crystal and Earl disliked one another. Knowing this, Vanetta led Crystal to believe that, together, they were exploiting Earl, while at the same time leading Earl to believe that, together, they were exploiting Crystal. When the women were together, they would laugh about "that crazy old man." When Vanetta was alone with Earl, she would let him vent about "that triflin' fat bitch." When the three were together, Vanetta was careful not to align herself completely with one or the other. When Earl and Crystal "got into it" (when they fought), Vanetta had to react with delicacy. Sometimes she would remain silent, shrugging when pushed to take a side. Other times, she would align with Crystal, later explaining to Earl that she was only keeping up the façade.

To sustain a disposable tie, people sometimes made risky and costly wagers on the relationship. While these wagers may have appeared absurd to an outside observer—not to mention to a good number of inside observers as well—they made sense by the practical logic of disposable ties. By mid-January, Arleen and her boys had moved out of the apartment they shared with Crystal, staying at a shelter until early February, when Arleen had moved into a small, one-bedroom apartment in a large, multiunit complex on the northern edge of the ghetto. Although it was not immediately obvious why Crystal had allowed Arleen and her boys to stay in the apartment after they had been evicted, one reason, perhaps the primary reason, became clear once Crystal moved in. Crystal had only three garbage bags of clothes to her name. She had no furniture,

<sup>16</sup> As Bourdieu (2000, pp. 145, 152) once observed, the *habitus* (which he often referred to as "embodied history") "is the basis of an *implicit collusion* among all the agents who are product of similar conditions and conditionings. . . . This *collusio*, an immediate agreement in ways of judging and acting which does not presuppose either the communication of consciousnesses, still less a contractual decision, is the basis of a practical mutual understanding."

television, mattress, microwave, or appliances. Arleen did not have much, but she had these things. Crystal began sleeping on Arleen's love seat and watching her television.

Crystal and Arleen's relationship had been strained from the beginning, but on March 1, Crystal's disability check came, and she invited Arleen and her boys out to dinner at Applebee's. I met up with the party shortly after dinner, at a tattoo parlor. By the night's end, Crystal had spent \$250—a third of her monthly income—on taxi fares, food, and belly button piercings for herself and Arleen. At first, I was frustrated with Crystal for what I considered to be a senseless binge. Later, however, I would come to better understand her motivations that evening.

In February, Crystal had left the apartment previously occupied by Arleen. After bouncing from place to place, she had landed in a homeless shelter. When March came, Crystal attempted to reactivate the disposable tie she had forged with Arleen, having learned that her old roommate recently had found a new apartment. Crystal figured—*sensed* is more accurate, the murky business of participating in these intermediate and fleeting connections being guided more by one's tacit and emotional knowledge, the collection of variegated and infixed competences usually collapsed under the term "street smarts," than by sterile utility maximization—that if she treated Arleen and her boys to a night out, they might assume that more fun escapades were to come if they allowed Crystal to move in.<sup>17</sup> After all, Crystal needed Arleen (or somebody), as surviving on her small fixed income alone was unfeasible.

The day after their evening out, Crystal asked Arleen if she could move in. Arleen said yes but later would renege. "The landlord already been on my case," she would explain, truthfully. "There just ain't enough room, Crystal." Arleen would go on to tell me, "Don't ask me [to move in]! [Crystal] can't stay with me. . . . The thing was, I wasn't never gonna let Crystal come and stay with me from the get go. I just told her that to throw her off. And she wasn't fittin' to come stay with me with *no money*. . . . No. Nope. You might as well stay in that shelter."

<sup>17</sup> Duneier (1999, p. 344) has spoken of the uncertainty endemic to the ethnographer's task of explaining individual behavior. I acknowledge my own uncertainty here. I have eliminated competing explanations for Crystal's actions, but it would be unwise and vain to claim with complete certainty that her behavior was reducible solely to a kind of calculated risk. Much human behavior cannot be explained by a single rationale. Spending money without inhibition is fun and can enhance one's feeling of self-worth. It is also something many people, rich and poor, have been known to do. As Jencks (1997, p. xiv) has observed with characteristic insight, "Most people find that spending all their money on necessities is unbearably depressing. The poor are as subject to this dilemma as the rest of us. . . . Once we concede that people cannot live by bread alone, we should not expect poor people to spend all their money on either bread or its equivalent."

Crystal bet on Arleen and lost. I talked with Crystal after Arleen had refused her request, asking, "So when you were spending money [that night], you were thinking you could be able—"

"—to stay with her," Crystal finished my sentence.

"Stay with her, right."

"But it didn't work out that way."

### Burning Ties

By and large, disposable ties were short-term relationships. Sometimes, ties were burned forever, their participants turning their backs on each other and never looking back. Other times, disposable ties transformed into something like weak ties: they became deactivated (with mixed results) later. Some disposable ties lasted weeks. Others stretched on for months. Sometimes, acquaintances maintained a friendship (or at least a tolerance for one another) that allowed them to exchange resources for an extended period of time. (Tina relied on several disposable ties after her eviction but soon found herself moving into the extra bedroom of a house owned by a single white man named Ron, who had a crush on her. She would stay for well over a year.) What mechanisms severed disposable ties? They were countless, no doubt, as demanding relationships between virtual strangers were inherently brittle. What was surprising was not that ties fizzled out but that, in rare instances, they sometimes withstood the brutish conditions under which they were forged.

In the simplest of cases, crude external pressures snapped disposable ties. When Vanetta was sent to prison, she no longer was any help to Earl or Crystal. And after 11 months with Betty, Lorraine was diagnosed with diabetes and moved out. Reasoning that Betty's chain-smoking would only exacerbate her condition, Lorraine convinced her older sister, Odessa, to open her doors to her (even though Odessa withheld support immediately after Lorraine was evicted). Ties involving men and women were highly volatile. After their eviction, Ned and Pam moved in with Travis, whom they had met at the trailer park. Soon after, however, Ned began to suspect that Travis was attracted to Pam. The men began to argue, culminating in Ned and Pam's packing up and spending the next week in a cheap motel.

Those who formed multiple ties bolstered some at the expense of others. This was what ended Trisha and Arleen's "sisterhood." Shortly after Arleen moved in with her, Trisha began "talking to" (dating) a man who went by "Silk." Silk, who recently had been released from prison on drug charges, despised Trisha's run-down apartment (even though he did not pay a penny to stay there). A few days before the first of May, Silk and

Trisha disappeared for several days. Arleen thought that the couple was visiting relatives or friends and that they would be back soon. But to her surprise, movers (contracted by Trisha's payee) showed up May 1 and began packing Trisha's things. Forced out, Arleen called her sister, Sheree, who, having recently moved into a larger apartment, offered to let Arleen and her boys stay with her temporarily. At the time of this writing, Arleen and Trisha have not spoken again.

Disposable ties frayed under the weight of multiple factors associated with the harsh conditions that necessitated these relationships in the first place. One of Arleen and Crystal's first major arguments, a week into their new friendship, revealed several factors that stressed the relationship. Arleen and I had gone to look for apartments when Crystal called. I could hear Crystal's voice screaming on the other end. Arleen said little before hanging up, visibly frustrated. "It is too ridiculous!" she said. "As long as we have food, she fine. But when we don't, it's like this! . . . I shouldn't have [stayed] this month. Then I wouldn't have to worry about every time I turn around, somebody saying, 'You should get out.'"

Reasoning that picking up food would prevent Crystal from putting her and her boys out, Arleen told me to pull up to the corner store. She ordered a \$99 meat deal—an inner-city staple consisting of chicken wings and legs, pork chops, neck bones, pig feet, and other low-cost cuts—paying for it with food stamps. While the man behind the counter bagged her order, Arleen began stewing about Crystal. "She bogus! Matt, she don't clean up. She don't do nothing at all. . . . I'm taking care of everything."

When we arrived back at the apartment, Crystal, incensed, explained that because Jafaris had disobeyed her, she had told him to stand outside in January's bitter cold. Jori had refused to let his brother suffer such a punishment and had called Crystal a bitch.

"You know what?" Crystal yelled. "Yeah, I'm a bitch. But remember I'm that *same bitch* that opened up my door and let you stay here even though I didn't know you from Adam and Eve. I was that *same bitch* that let you in! The landlord didn't care. She don't have to care."

"I don't know why you saying all this 'cause I know that," Arleen responded. She had weathered these kinds of altercations before, her voice assertive and clear.

Jori tried jumping into the fray to explain his side of the story, but his mother cut him off. "Y'all wait 'till I leave [to cause trouble]? Where am I fittin' to go? Where," she yelled, "am I fittin' to go? You [kids] both out of order!"

Jori began to cry.

Crystal waved her phone in the air. "Whatever my [spiritual] mom says I should do, I'm gonna do, because that's too much disrespect. *Too much!*" She dialed the number, pressed the phone to her ear, and kept talking.

"If he'd just called me one bitch, that would've been fine. I'd have just chopped it off. But to be called a bitch for an hour straight?"

No one picked up. Crystal redialed.

"This is fucking ridiculous, Jori," Jori's mother chided.

Arleen walked to her room and began venting to the ceiling, a passive-aggressive response I would see her use repeatedly. "She always complaining there ain't no food. But it ain't *my* responsibility to feed nobody but my *kids*. Nobody!"

"I didn't ask you to buy shit for me," Crystal yelled back. "Because please believe it, *ple-ase*. 'Cause I'm gonna have whatever I need. Whatever. Whether I have to sell some ass, Crystal Sherella Sherrod Mayberry is gonna get whatever she needs! What-ev-er!"

Arleen's eyes found her boys'. "I'm sick of y'all! . . . If it ain't one thing, it's another. If I knew I'd be having to go through this, I would have left [after the eviction]!"

Crystal dialed again, still no answer. Now it was Crystal's turn to talk to the ceiling, but (as was her custom) she began praying out loud. "God, I need an answer right now. God, please. I need to hear something from my momma, my bishop. God, I *proooooomise* you, I wish you wouldn't have let me learn to love the way I love. . . . I wish I would've been bitter for all the terrible things that happened in my life. *Whoa*, Lord!"

"You don't need nobody to answer [your calls]. You know what you want. This your house."

Crystal began humming a hymn. She walked around the apartment, humming and breathing in through her nose. She would pause and close her eyes. She was calming herself down.

Arleen looked at Jori. "If she tell us we gotta go, where is we going?"  
Silence.

"It's like, like I gotta *kiss butt* to be here. Where am I going, Jori?"

Arleen continued like that, berating Jori and Jafaris and complaining about Crystal, through sidelong swipes, until Crystal finally answered.

"You know what." Crystal, her eyes filled with tears, was not yelling but purring in a new voice, hushed and soothing. "Let me say something. *Eww*, God, I wish you'd have never gave me the spirit of love. . . . My feelings are hurt from both of y'all. But, I can't, I can't put y'all out. . . . 'Cause, like I told you, I am filled with the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost telling me not to make y'all leave."

In this interaction, a number of stressors were brought to light: Crystal's relationship with Arleen's children ("*That's too much disrespect*"); a perceived imbalance in the gift exchange in terms of resources ("*It ain't my responsibility to feed nobody but my kids*") and domestic labor ("*She don't do nothing at all*"); Crystal's power over Arleen, a woman twice her age, and Arleen's humiliation over that fact ("*It's like I gotta kiss butt to be*

here”); and Arleen’s desperate circumstances (“*Where am I fittin’ to go?*”). Arleen would move into a shelter two weeks later. Her relationship with Crystal more or less would draw to a quiet, awkward close after their evening at Applebee’s.

Many such relationships, however, did not end so quietly. Roughly two months after Arleen and Crystal parted ways, Crystal moved in with Patricia, the woman she had met at the bus stop. After Crystal had been there for about a week, Patricia’s biological daughter (age 14) took Crystal’s cell phone to school and lost it. Furious, Crystal confronted Patricia, demanding \$200 compensation. Patricia refused to pay, and tensions mounted in the house. As Crystal tells it (I did not personally witness this event), the next evening, Patricia, drunk on wine mixed with brandy, told Crystal, “I’m gonna get you out of my house!” and dialed her sister for backup. Crystal, in turn, called her cousin and two sisters. Crystal’s crew arrived first, waiting outside in a car. When Patricia and Crystal took their argument outside, Patricia, stumbling drunk, lost her balance and fell to the ground. Staring down, Crystal lifted her foot and brought it down on Patricia’s face—then again and again. Seeing this, one of Crystal’s sisters sprung out of the car and hit Patricia with a hammer before pulling Crystal away. Crystal would soon be driving away, leaving Patricia there on the sidewalk, balled up in a fetal position.

Crystal’s cousin and sisters were not slow to lend their support that night, but it extended only so far. After flying to Crystal’s side for the fight, the women dropped her off at the waiting room of St. Joseph’s Hospital, where, homeless once more, she would spend the night.

## DISCUSSION

If evicted tenants usually spoke lovingly of their kin, they often found help elsewhere. Many factors impeded support among kin ties. A lack of resources in addition to structural and legal barriers prevented poor kin from helping; middle-class kin also withheld support from their less fortunate relatives, justifying their actions by citing past aid understood to be more than sufficient or by affixing to their kin a collection of base qualities that rendered them undeserving.<sup>18</sup> Often, then, rather than turning to their kin, evicted tenants reached out to strangers. They found them all over the city, but institutions that brought together people with similarly pressing needs were especially fertile ground for disposable ties. Roommates within a homeless shelter often became roommates outside

<sup>18</sup> It is anything but axiomatic, then, that the poor greatly benefit from ties to the middle class or that resources naturally slide down vertical connections, as if by gravity.

of it, pooling their resources to secure housing and make rent. Through a kind of accelerated and simulated intimacy, virtual strangers quickly became “best friends” or “sisters.” With the tie locked in place, resources were exchanged—including housing, food stamps, money, child care, information, and emotional comfort—making survival possible and sometimes enjoyable.

“My family don’t help,” Arleen once told me. “I don’t have nobody to help me.”

“. . . So when you really need help, who do you go to?” I asked.

“I search around until I find somebody [who] will help me.”

But almost inexorably, disposable ties would snap under the weight of any number of factors, including the tendency to form multiple ties with individuals who would then compete with one another. When disposable ties were disposed of, individuals began looking for a new relationship or might attempt to approach a relative. This looping pattern of forming, using, and burning ties, this weary rhythm—make a friend, use a friend, lose a friend—best captures an essential survival strategy tenants regularly employed. When tenuous but intense relationships between virtual strangers ended badly—or violently, as they sometimes did—they fostered deep misgivings between peers and neighbors, eroding community and network stability. The memory of having been used or mistreated by a disposable tie encouraged people to be suspicious of others. Relying on disposable ties, then, is both a response to and a source of social instability.<sup>19</sup>

Other ethnographers have documented network dynamics in poor neighborhoods similar to those recorded here. Rainwater (1970, p. 73) observed that the residents of Pruitt-Igoe reconciled themselves “to moving through life treating relationships as readily replaceable and interchangeable, rather than making heavy investments in a few relationships.” Howell (1973, p. 335) spoke of relationships that “often had a pattern of forming very quickly and intensely and stopping abruptly.” Although Liebow (1967, pp. 163–65, 182) described the street corner man as surrounded by a core group of family and friends with whom he was “up tight” as well as, in the outer rings, by a looser network of friends and acquaintances, he also documented “the easy quickness with which a casual encounter can ripen into an intense . . . relationship, and the equal ease with which these relationships break down under stress.” And, indeed, a close reading of *All Our Kin* reveals that Stack documented not one but three types of networks operating in the Flats: those made up of *essential kin*, family members and fictive kin actively participating in

<sup>19</sup> Of course, it is a minor source compared to the structural causes of instability: e.g., rising housing and energy costs, welfare retrenchment, racial segregation, widespread joblessness, mass incarceration.

exchange networks; *relatives*, kin not actively participating; and *friends*. Stack wrote that “kinship networks have stability because the needs of the poor are constant,” but friendships “change more often, and friends drop in and out of one another’s networks while assuming a stable position in their own kinship networks” (1974, p. 54). Clustered around the Flats resident, then, was a primary group of kinfolk crucial to her survival, while friends orbited this core, like electrons flitting around the center of an atom, helping for short bursts before spinning out and being replaced by others. One can catch glimpses of disposable ties in more contemporary urban ethnography as well: in strangers daily interacting in the underground economy (Venkatesh 2006) or in homeless people relying on one another for food and drugs, companionship and shelter (Bourgois and Schonberg 2009). Disposable ties, it would seem, long have been a part of the lives of the urban poor, even if analysts have given these ties only cursory treatment. Neither fieldworkers of the previous generation nor those writing today have placed disposable ties at the center of their analyses, identifying them, as I have here, as an indispensable resource for low-income families that plays a critical role in critical episodes in which survival is at stake.<sup>20</sup>

### White Poverty, Black Poverty

White poverty and black poverty are not the same thing. With respect to kin networks, researchers have found that poor blacks are less likely to have middle-class siblings than poor whites (Heflin and Pattillo 2006). And, indeed, of the evicted tenants I met, white tenants had better access to family members with steady work and savings accounts. Nevertheless, white and black tenants alike experienced difficulties soliciting kin for

<sup>20</sup> Disposable ties may play a larger role in the lives of the urban poor today than they did 50 years ago, when Stack conducted her fieldwork. Explaining why would entail evaluating how the deconcentration of poverty, the crack epidemic, the rise of the black middle class, the prison boom, and a number of other social transformations have affected poor families. This is a task well beyond the scope of this article. But it should be noted, however briefly, that state policies developed in the latter decades of the 20th century had the effect of undermining kin networks of the urban poor. In the 1960s, incentives were affixed to Aid to Families with Dependent Children benefits to limit so-called kin dependence. “Mothers received higher welfare stipends if they lived alone, or if they lived with a female friend or stranger, than if they chose to remain with their own mothers, their grandmothers, or other relatives” (Lopez and Stack 2001, p. 38). The consequences of these measures may have been long-term, their effects on kin relations felt even after welfare was retooled and rolled back. Furthermore, policies that propelled the retrenchment of the welfare state and the rise of mass incarceration have exacerbated low-income families’ insecurity and desperation, surely compromising their ability to participate in kin-based exchange networks (Forrest and Kearns 2001; Goffman 2009).

help. And white and black tenants alike depended heavily on disposable ties during the difficult months following their eviction. With respect to the foundational aspects of the network-based survival strategies described here, the similarities of white and black tenants—both crippled under miserable poverty—far outweighed the differences.<sup>21</sup> Gans (1982, pp. 277–78) observed a similar pattern. “I continue to be impressed,” he once remarked, “by how similar members of different ethnic groups think and act when they are of the same socioeconomic level . . . and must deal with the same conditions.”

That said, one important difference deserves attention. Whites were able to get by on fewer disposable ties, and those that they formed tended to last longer. (After her eviction, Lorraine relied primarily on a single tie: Betty, with whom she lived for almost a year. Tina stayed with Ron for well over a year.) One reason for this was that the people with whom they formed new relationships (usually other whites) typically possessed more resources than those with whom blacks formed relationships (usually other blacks). (Disposable ties rarely bridged racial boundaries; cf. Suttles 1968, pp. 31–35; Merry 1981, p. 121.) Betty owned her trailer and could accommodate Lorraine. Ron had inherited his house from his parents and could provide Tina with a spare room. Ron also had a newer Jeep Wrangler that he allowed Tina to use when carting her daughters to and from work and school. In the black inner city, cars (not to mention owned homes) were in much shorter supply.<sup>22</sup>

Not only were white tenants' disposable ties more resource-laden, but white tenants themselves had better access to housing than their black counterparts. Although Ned was wanted on a drug charge and Pam had felonies and an eviction on her record, the couple was able to secure a decent and affordable two-bedroom apartment in a working-class neighborhood less than two months after their eviction. Studies have shown that blacks (and black women in particular) have far less access to rental housing than whites (Massey and Lundy 2001), and during my fieldwork I witnessed landlords blatantly discriminate against African-Americans.

<sup>21</sup> More could be said about the microeconomy of differences among the urban poor—not only those between white and black families but also those among blacks and whites living in the same neighborhood (not to mention the same household)—with respect to a number of other matters. Variation that first appears trivial, whether one possesses a driver's license or lives on 19th and Atkinson or 21st and Atkinson, can place peers on drastically divergent paths (see Wacquant 1996).

<sup>22</sup> Here, it is important to recognize the tremendous white/black wealth gap (Oliver and Shapiro 1997; Shapiro 2004), explained not only by the historical career of racism manifest in inequalities in inheritance and home ownership but also by poverty in the extended family, which constrains asset accumulation (Heflin and Pattillo 2002; Chiteji and Hamilton 2005).

On one occasion, a landlord named Hector was showing Vanetta and Crystal a small two-bedroom apartment in a predominantly Mexican neighborhood. I stayed outside with Vanetta's kids. When the women came out, I could tell something was wrong. Vanetta told me she had asked Hector if he had another unit with a tub. Hector said he did and began describing the unit, saying it was the same rent only bigger and somewhat nicer. Then, suddenly, as if forgetting something, he stopped himself. His hand went for his pocket, and he answered his cell phone (which had not rung). It was obvious to Vanetta and Crystal that no one had called, but Hector pretended to have a conversation with someone on the other line. When he hung up, he told Vanetta and Crystal, "Ah! That was my partner and, wouldn't you know it, he just rented our other unit. Just right now!" Vanetta was crying and shaking with anger by the time she finished telling me the story. I copied down Hector's number from the For Rent sign and called him up the next day. I (a white male) met Hector in the same unit Vanetta and Crystal had been shown. I told him I took home about \$1,400 a month (Vanetta and Crystal's combined income), that I had three kids (the number Vanetta had), and that I'd really like a unit with a bathtub. "My wife and I like to give the kids baths, you know, and the shower makes it tough." Hector did not hesitate telling me that he had another unit available. He even drove me to it when I told him my wife had dropped me off.<sup>23</sup>

### Blending Survival Networks

Although evicted tenants relied heavily on disposable ties to make ends meet, during some episodes they also benefited mightily from kin support. Teddy received help from his sister after his eviction, but when homeless before that, he relied on Scott, a disposable tie. After being evicted, Lorraine lived with Beaker (her brother), then Betty (a virtual stranger), then Odessa (her sister). And although it would be months after her eviction, Arleen's sister would offer her a place to stay temporarily. It was not universally the case, then, that evicted tenants had been cast out of kin networks for failing to reciprocate favors (and in fact were evicted precisely because they had). In fact, Arleen was evicted for the opposite reason. She defaulted on her rent after contributing a large portion of her welfare check to help pay for her sister's funeral.

<sup>23</sup> In this case, my whiteness helped to facilitate an ethnographic insight. In other cases, it served as an impediment (as, e.g., when tenants suspected I was an undercover cop). In the field, multiple dimensions of my social position presented me with certain opportunities, of which I tried to take advantage, and challenges, which I worked to overcome (see Emirbayer and Desmond 2012).

By and large, family members or disposable ties were asked for help depending not on the *weight* of the demand—tenants relied on disposable ties for support that was demanding (housing) as well as that which was less so (food)—but on the *timing* of it. Although some combined support from disposable ties and kin during the same time period—during the months after leaving the homeless shelter, Vanetta relied on Crystal and Earl as well as on her older sister—to meet basic needs, most relied almost exclusively on family members or on disposable ties during separate intervals. Because forming a disposable tie was an inherently risky endeavor, introducing new friends to family members often meant that the latter shared in the risk and, should things end badly, the costs. After Vanetta broke up with Earl, someone shot up Vanetta’s sister’s apartment. Vanetta and her children were asleep inside at the time. Everyone suspected Earl.

Not only did mixing new friends with family members compromise kin ties, but it also threatened disposable ties. Reaching out to family members while cultivating a disposable tie could decelerate its momentum and threaten the new relationship. If one failed to meet a new friend’s need, however minor—by skipping a meal to join family for Sunday dinner, for example—she left open the possibility that that friend would find help elsewhere by forming a new tie or by reactivating an old one. If this occurred, the new tie could grow stronger—the relationship briskly accelerating—and eventually the original disposable tie could be severed. New friendships worked best when they were all-encompassing and characterized by high levels of “encapsulation” (Uehara 1990, p. 529), when friends sought help exclusively from one another. And yet, relationships based on “restricted exchange,” those characterized by the norm of quid pro quo exchange between two parties, were inherently brittle (Ekeh 1974). The very thing on which disposable ties initially relied to function most effectively in due course helped to weaken and sever the ties.

### The Critical Case of Eviction

By participating in everyday life in two poor neighborhoods, I met many nonevicted families and daily was able to observe quotidian transactions of the sort that occupy the pages of *All Our Kin*. Given this, two questions present themselves. First, did the network strategies employed by poor families on a day-to-day basis differ considerably from those employed during a crisis, and, second, was it the case that evicted tenants relied on kin support to a lesser extent than their neighbors? Let me address each question in turn.

If the first question had been put to her 40 years ago, Stack (1974) would have answered it with an unequivocal no. She not only documented that poor black families swap goods and services “on a daily, practically

an hourly, basis” but also witnessed them extending help to kin experiencing crises (including illnesses, deaths, and evictions; pp. 35, 92). For me, however, the answer is not so cut-and-dried. Some (but not all) residents of poor communities who had gained a degree of stability—those with decent, subsidized apartments or steady jobs, for example—did not participate in the pursuit of forging and using disposable ties, even if they actively did so before their stability was won. After securing an apartment months after her eviction, Arleen avoided talking with her new neighbors. “I mainly keep to myself here,” she explained. “Because people just bring trouble.” But Arleen was unable to keep to herself for very long. Her new landlord soon would evict her, causing her to reenter the marketplace of disposable ties. People often relied on disposable ties sparingly during episodes of relative security and heavily during intervals of despondence and uncertainty.<sup>24</sup> However, the correspondence between stability and reliance on disposable ties is not perfect. Many of the men and women with whom I lived in the inner-city rooming house, for example, often formed, used, and discarded disposable ties during intervals of relative stability, times during which they were not experiencing a crisis on the scale of eviction. For some, it seemed, what once was necessary for survival had since become habit.

With respect to the second question, I met many families in the trailer park as well as in the inner city (evicted and nonevicted alike) who were not surrounded by “a cluster of relatives from personal kinship networks [to whom they had] continuing claims” (Stack 1974, p. 61). Their claims to kin support, rather, were more feeble and sporadic. I observed both groups slide in and out of cooperating familial networks. As with their evicted counterparts, nonevicted families sometimes called on kin for help, whereas in other situations they relied on disposable ties. Some people in long-term romantic relationships, for example, often formed disposable ties with other women or men on the sly. These relationships functioned (in part) as insurance in case their current “main” relationship dissolved—and, with it, their housing and primary source of food and income. That said, rather than a representative case, this study is best regarded as a *critical case*: one that had “strategic importance in relation to the general problem” (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 78). If my focus was limited to evicted tenants, the reason was that the common yet critical event of eviction

<sup>24</sup> Sometimes security was provided by effective social services. Scott was able to decrease his reliance on disposable ties after being accepted into a men’s shelter that provided him with drug treatment and part-time employment. And after a fire took the apartment from which Lamar and his sons were being evicted, the Red Cross provided temporary housing and emergency relocation funds.

offered a unique opportunity to gain new perspectives on survival strategies and network dynamics among the urban poor.

### Conceptualizing Disposable Ties

Sociologists long have conceived of personal networks as consisting of a collection of ties that vary in strength. For Granovetter (1973, p. 1361), "the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie." Strong ties are those with high amounts of some (if not all) of these four qualities, and weak ties are those with low amounts. Are disposable ties simply a variant of weak ties? They are not, for a number of reasons. First, disposable ties usually are characterized by high levels of emotional intensity and reciprocity of goods and services. And those bound together by such a tie spend large amounts of time together. In this way, disposable ties, although between new acquaintances, resemble strong ties more so than weak ones. Second, while weak ties often act as "bridges" that connect one set of people to another, disposable ties rarely do so. In some cases, those who form disposable ties actively avoid (or are avoided by) close family members and friends, leaving them with virtually no one to bridge to. Moreover, relationships cast from disposable ties tend to be demanding, suffocating, and based on restricted exchange. They are not suitable for bridging or for diffusing information (this is the "strength of weak ties"). Here, then, is yet another difference between weak and disposable ties. The former "are an important resource in making possible mobility opportunity" (Granovetter 1973, p. 1373). The latter, often formed under duress between similarly dispossessed and desperate people, are an important resource for survival. Finally, there is the matter of disposability. The threat of termination looms above all relationships. But what makes disposable ties unique on this score is that the increased demands placed on brand-new acquaintances, demands disproportionate to the duration of the relationship, combine with the (often cloaked) instrumental cast of the relationship and the compounding pressures of poverty typically to truncate the tie's life span. Imagine a thin string connecting two acquaintances. Because the string can easily bear the weight of, say, valuable information passed between the pair, it may last indefinitely. This is the image of weak ties. But when that string is required to bear a heavier load—when it is used to bind together two strangers who share housing, food, and money; who give and receive child care, intimacy, emotional support, and sometimes sex; and who often spend most of their days together—the likelihood of its lasting decreases significantly. This is the image of disposable ties.

Disposable ties, therefore, are not weak ties. Nor do they resemble

strong ties in the traditional sense: bonds enveloping family members, good friends, and members of cliques. If disposable ties are straightforwardly neither strong nor weak ties, how, then, should we make sense of them? Although a number of scholars—Granovetter (1973, p. 1361) among them—have emphasized the multidimensionality of tie attributes, theorists have gained analytical purchase by collapsing these attributes into a single composite: strength (or lack thereof; see, e.g., Granovetter 1983; Burt 2004). In the majority of cases, such analytical reduction poses no significant drawbacks to structural theories of action since tie attributes tend to be highly correlated. A tie characterized by long duration and heightened propinquity, for example, tends also to be characterized by high levels of emotional intensity and resource exchange (Wellman 1979; Marsden and Campbell 1984). Disposable ties are important exceptions to this rule. Strong yet weak, crucial yet unstable, young yet demanding, personal yet superficial—involving “strangers,” each “near and far *at the same time*” (Simmel [1908] 1971, p. 148)—disposable ties often are characterized by a short duration but high levels of propinquity and by low levels of trust but high levels of resource exchange. They resemble a kind of admixture of primary and secondary contacts, to use Cooley’s ([1902] 1964) terms. If they do not at all fit comfortably within the strong/weak tie framework, the reason is that disposable ties involve the commingling of typically antipodal attributes, uniting characteristics that tend to be inversely related. Disposable ties represent a case in which the conventional (and otherwise usefully parsimonious) binary separating weak ties from strong ones falls apart. Perhaps this was the case because the weak/strong tie binary is modeled on middle-class experiences. Within different contexts, what, one might wonder, is the rule and what the exception?

In drawing attention to the importance of a peculiar kind of tie, this study has dug up, if only by accident, an old question in network analysis: What, precisely, *is* a tie? Or, more precisely, *which ties* should we care about (see Burt 1984; Zuckerman 2003)? A classic statement on this question is Laumann, Marsden, and Prensky’s (1983) essay on the “boundary specification problem.” The essay identifies two common strategies for defining social networks: the *nominalist approach*, in which the researcher defines the network to serve her own analytical purposes, and the *realist approach*, in which social actors themselves define the network. Both strategies are problematic. The nominalist approach can compel analysts to ignore critical ties to focus on conventional or convenient connections determined a priori to be the most important, whereas the realist approach usually depends on actors’ (imprecise, even fictionalized) accounts of their personal ties (see Marsden 1990). I adopted an alternative approach—what might be called a *pragmatic approach*—in which ties were prioritized depending on what they did (cf. Tilly 2005). Certain ties were accentuated

and others minimized depending on their relevance to a specific research question. In the pragmatic approach, the work of tie specification arises inductively over the course of the research endeavor, satisfied after sustained ethnographic observation, for example. This approach does not resolve the boundary specification problem, but it avoids it, in a way, by treating the composition of a social network not as an end in itself but as a means to an end.

The findings of this study have opened up possibilities for new lines of research. Survey researchers could explore the explanatory significance of disposable ties, developing methods that build on approaches designed to gather information on weak ties (cf. Lin, Fu, and Hsung 2001). This would require designing new ways of collecting information about social networks, techniques that would not conform to conventional categories (family/friends) or established binaries (strong/weak). Such advances would pave the way for new areas of investigation into the role of disposable ties in the lives of people occupying various positions on the socioeconomic hierarchy. Qualitative researchers, for their part, could delve deeper into the complex dimensions of disposable ties, investigating how people learn to form such ties, how they interpret their meaning, and, crucially, the consequences of relying on disposable ties for families and communities. More broadly, they could contribute to the work of widening and complicating our typology of social networks and our terminology of human relationships. It was only after sustained ethnographic fieldwork that I discovered a unique kind of relationship, one crucial to many poor families but overlooked by network analysts. This speaks to the power of ethnography to uncover dynamics of everyday life previously undetected by sociologists and to offer accounts that challenge and deepen our theories of how the social world works. This, to quote Katz (1997, p. 414), is perhaps “the single most compelling warrant for ethnography,” one implying that “no social research is complete without an ethnographic treatment of its subject matter.”

## CONCLUSION

This study has developed an alternative explanation to Stack’s thesis on survival among the urban poor, one that has emphasized the importance not of kin support but of disposable ties. Those striving to survive the stark realities of poverty are not left to choose between two extreme alternatives—deep embeddedness within kinship networks or complete isolation and individualism—but have at their disposal a third option: disposable ties. In analyzing how disposable ties are generated, used, and terminated, this article has contributed to our understanding of how net-

works operate in poor neighborhoods. It also has employed ethnography in the service of investigating how, in this modern moment of political austerity and financial insecurity, an era of increasing urbanization and inequality, welfare retrenchment and mass imprisonment, rising housing costs and stagnant wages and entrenched joblessness, those resigned to the margins of the metropolis endure conditions of severe destitution (see Duneier 2007).

My findings indicate that it is time to rethink the network-based survival strategies of the urban poor. By focusing primarily on strong and weak ties, poverty researchers have generated useful but ultimately incomplete accounts of everyday life and social relationships. The findings of this study suggest that our models of social inequality and disadvantage would benefit in terms of complexity and comprehension from a consideration of dynamics associated with disposable ties. Kinship networks and friendship circles, community collectives and primary groups—these traditionally have been the stuff of anthropological and sociological ethnography, even as social theorists of previous generations wrote of the increasing atomization of modern life and the fraying of social bonds in urban centers (Wirth [1938] 1967; Durkheim [1897] 1951) and even as contemporary thinkers increasingly have identified the ways in which durable inequality is produced through relations between nonintimates (Tilly 1998). We have much to learn, then, by breaking with tradition and studying interactions between strangers, fleeting relationships, and social disorganization. A backward glance reveals that this is not a break with tradition at all but, as with all such breaks, a return to one (e.g., Zorbaugh 1929).

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