What first struck me about Villa Victoria, a subsidized housing complex in Boston's South End, was the landscape. Several rows of three-story concrete houses with high front stoops, pitched roofs, and Spanish ironwork abutted a small brick-layered plaza. The plaza was framed all around by **macetums**, soil-filled bales in which small trees and shrubs had been planted. Permanent tables and benches were installed throughout the plaza. Surrounding it lay a short, almost quaint, cobble-stoned path. Only one tower in the complex’s twenty acres rose over five stories, to about a dozen stories. The complex evoked intimacy. Villa Victoria’s landscape had seen better times—paint had peeled off walls, garbage was strewn about, and occasional rodents scuttled along the sides of the streets. But the structure’s understated dignity, hidden within layers of peeling paint and grime, was evident to anyone willing to pay attention. I had never thought of housing complexes as physically appealing, but if these “projects” underwent some refurbishment, they might be quite beautiful.

Villa Victoria’s uniqueness seemed to extend to social relations. It was inhabited almost entirely by Puerto Ricans, in a neighborhood, and city, with few of them. Its construction had resulted not from a policy decision but from a grassroots struggle by migrants from rural Puerto Rico during the 1960s. It was managed not by an impersonal bureaucracy but by a group of current and former residents along with professional staff. It had not been a disengaged inner-city ghetto; it boasted a rich history of community participation, with hundreds of cultural programs and events accumulated over the years. Everyone knew everyone else. There was little violence. Families remained there generation after generation. It even held a yearly festival of Puerto Rican arts and culture attended by thousands of people throughout New England. The Villa, as it is known, bore little resemblance, either physically or socially, to the impersonal high-rises in Chicago and New York with which we usually associate housing projects.
For years, social scientists had argued that the concentration of poverty in housing projects would produce distrust, alienation, apathy, and social isolation—the disappearance of what sociologists have called social capital. At the community level, the disappearance would reduce community participation and social organization; at the individual level, it would cut off ties to mainstream society, producing social isolation and indifference to community engagement. The effects on the individual had received special attention, for W. J. Wilson’s (1987) influential book *The Truly Disadvantaged* had argued that a neighborhood’s poverty level would affect people independently of their own poverty or hardship. Many studies confirmed his theory; poor people who were given vouchers to live in middle-class neighborhoods did better than comparably poor people in poor neighborhoods. But few researchers had examined systematically how concentrated poverty affected social capital, had examined exactly what reasons simply living in a poor neighborhood contributed to apathy and social isolation and other unwarranted outcomes. The question of how was known as the “black box” of neighborhood effects.

Villa Victoria seemed to present an exceptional opportunity to open the black box. If we could understand how residents maintained social capital here despite living in concentrated poverty, perhaps we could learn how to prevent the deterioration of social relations in other poor neighborhoods. This became the objective of the study: to rely on Villa Victoria to open the black box. As I pursued this task, however, two things became clear.

First, I discovered that Villa Victoria was unique only in some senses, quite ordinarily poor in others. Some residents were highly integrated into middle-class networks, but others were profoundly isolated from mainstream society, as Wilson and others would expect. The neighborhood had experienced times of high community participation, but it had also witnessed prolonged periods of apathy and social alienation. The Villa seemed less unique than heterogeneous and dynamic. One might say the concentration of poverty had produced its expected effects but in certain respects more than others, at some times more than others, and on some individuals more than the rest. To open the black box, therefore, I had to investigate what accounted for this variation, over time and across individuals, in how residents responded to the concentration of poverty.

As I pursued this question, I came to another conclusion. The real quandary was not why the Villa seemed so dynamic and heterogeneous but why the theories would lead me to expect otherwise. Much of what I uncovered in the Villa seemed at first to be counterintuitive, such as the high levels, during some periods, of community participation or the presence of many individuals with ties to the middle class. Yet on reflection, much of it seemed quite logical as well, provided I asked the right questions. For example, despite living in concentrated poverty, several residents did many things outside the Villa, in middle-class neighborhoods, where they had opportunities to meet middle-class people; that these residents were not isolated from the mainstream was not surprising. Most of the time, social scientists think of these as rare examples, statistical outliers in the overall phenomenon. (This occurs even in the reading of ethnographies, which often uncover heterogeneity in neighborhoods.) But taking seriously the incongruity between what I expected in theory and what I witnessed in the field became critical, since the mismatch was so salient and on so many different aspects of social capital. The more seriously I addressed the incongruity, the more the theories seemed simplistic and implausible as commonly understood. In fact, some of them would push me to look for answers repeatedly in the familiar places, resulting in the stereotypical pictures of poor neighborhoods and the people who live in them prevalent in society and represented in the media. If I tried to find that neighborhood poverty produced apathy in the Villa, it was easy for me to do so, since over the two years I conducted the study I met many residents who had no interest in participating in “the community.” But when I tried to explain why some residents were not apathetic despite living in concentrated poverty, it became clear that the original theory had relied on a number of untested and possibly unwarranted assumptions. Rather than side issues, these became the central concerns of the study. The result was a book different from most ethnographic case studies of housing complexes or poor neighborhoods. Instead of an overall description of life in the Villa, a community study, it became a sustained critique of specific theories about the effects of concentrated poverty, a critique based on my attempts to understand heterogeneity and differences over time in this neighborhood. The resulting book is five analytical essays on different aspects of social capital, all of which use the Villa as the central empirical case. The essays are introduced by a chapter on the general theories to be addressed and another on how Villa Victoria was created. They are concluded by a chapter systematizing the perspective from which I believe the black box should be opened.

In chapter 1, I discuss the social scientific research on neighborhood poverty. I outline the main sociological approaches to be examined, social isolation, and social disorganization theories. I also address the questions of culture and agency, especially thorny issues in a study of this nature.
Readers not interested in an abstract discussion of sociological research may skip to the next chapter without fear of missing substantive findings about the Villa.

In chapter 2, I relate how this poor, predominantly Puerto Rican housing complex came into existence in the 1970s in one of the most affluent sections of Boston, the South End (which, it should be noted, is not South Boston or "Southie"). In the 1960s, the section of the South End that is now the Villa, parcel 19, was designated as an urban renewal area—residents were to be relocated, the buildings bulldozed over, and the area redeveloped as luxury condominiums and commercial space. Something similar had occurred a decade earlier in the predominantly Italian-American West End, as described in Herbert Gans's (1962) classic, Urban Villagers. Whereas the West Enders were ultimately displaced from their neighborhood, the mostly Puerto Rican residents of parcel 19 organized and successfully fought their relocation, producing, rather than a luxury condominium, an affordable housing complex, Villa Victoria. I describe, in this chapter, the historical conditions that resulted in the parcel's residents' different fate. The neighborhood's early history would influence, for years to come, the residents' capacity to develop and sustain social capital.

In the next two chapters I address the Villa's transformation in one aspect of social capital—community participation—from a historical and analytic perspective. I explain, in chapter 3, how the neighborhood's level of community participation, which had peaked in the mid-1980s, declined over time in ways one would not theoretically expect. Indeed, based on the tenets of social disorganization theory, the structural conditions of the neighborhood were such that community participation should have risen or, at the very least, remained stable over time. The chapter shows that education levels rose dramatically, residential stability increased markedly, and material hardship appeared to remain stable. The chapter introduces this dilemma: Why, then, did participation in the Villa decline?

I continue examining, in chapter 4, two important issues neglected by existing theory: the role of cohorts and the role of cultural framing. I show that, contrary to common assumptions, shifts in a neighborhood's structural conditions (such as its residential stability level) do not necessarily produce shifts in community participation; the latter result primarily from transformations at the level of the cohort. Indeed, the significance of the cohort has been missed by much of the discussion of community participation. In the Villa, a highly participating cohort was replaced by a relatively nonparticipating one. To address why the cohorts showed different levels of participation, I examine their framing of their neighborhood. The frames through which residents perceived their neighborhood affected how they reacted to their common structural conditions. The most recent cohort saw the peeling paint and grime and perceived an undesirable ghetto; the earlier one saw the same and perceived a "beautiful" community. Though living in an undesirable ghetto was insufficient reason to participate in local activities, preserving a beautiful community was a powerful motivator. The evidence presented in that chapter demonstrates that not everyone sees the same neighborhood through the same eyes—and that how residents see their neighborhood affects how they react to it and whether they are willing to "get involved."

An issue rarely mentioned in the study of community participation is introduced in chapters 3 and 4. Even in the Villa's periods of high participation, only a small minority of residents were "community activists" in any meaningful sense. When many people think of a highly engaged neighborhood they imagine large numbers of residents knocking on doors, leading neighborhood clean-up drives, and passing out leaflets for upcoming events. Yet community participation might well be what business economists have termed an 80/20 phenomenon, where a large portion of the activity (say, 80%) is undertaken by a small proportion of the population (20%). Understanding community participation as an 80/20 phenomenon (or perhaps a 95/5 phenomenon) helps understand why community participation may be high even in the poorest neighborhoods.

In the subsequent three chapters, which are more ethnographic in the traditional sense, I set aside the issue of community participation to examine the residents' social networks. In chapter 5, I distinguish individual from collective social isolation and focus exclusively on the latter. Within any given neighborhood, some residents may be more isolated than others; but a neighborhood as a whole might be, on average, more isolated than another neighborhood or more isolated than one would expect given its circumstances or location. The Villa as a whole is rather (collectively) isolated from the surrounding South End. Despite being surrounded by thousands of liberal, socially minded middle-class residents, Villa residents tend to have almost no contact, intimate or superficial, with the middle-class residents who are nearby. The question is why. The material presented in this chapter demonstrates that the ecological characteristics of the neighborhood itself—the composition of streets and buildings, the configuration of houses and their distribution across blocks—was partly to blame for the fact that residents hardly interact with their middle-class neighbors across the street. This suggests that social isolation should be
thought of not as a necessary product of concentrated poverty but as an outcome partly conditional on context-specific characteristics of the neighborhood.

In chapter 6 I examine the relationship between social capital and the number of institutional resources and businesses in the neighborhood. In his famous depiction of Chicago, Wilson (1987) described in convincing detail how the departure of the middle class led to the erosion of institutional resources in Chicago's South Side, the disappearance of grocery stores, banks, churches, and recreational areas. Many social scientists, in turn, came to think of inner-city poor neighborhoods as places that, by definition, are deprived of institutional resources. But Villa Victoria, it is clear, is rich in neighborhood resources and not for accidental reasons. This counterintuitive finding is shown to be a rather logical result of the development of poverty in this neighborhood and city.

I then ask whether this prevalence of resources affects social capital. I show that resource prevalence might, ironically, contribute to social isolation, by reducing residents' opportunities to interact with persons of other neighborhoods. However, this relationship is conditional on, among other things, internal cultural dynamics affecting which groups claim implicit ownership of the available resources.

I investigate the social ties of individuals in chapter 7. While some of the Villa's residents indeed seemed socially isolated, others were strongly connected to middle-class people, society, attitudes, and expectations. (These connections were generally not to residents in the surrounding South End but to those in other, farther neighborhoods.) Relying on an in-depth analysis of the lives of five residents, I examine why some were socially isolated and some were not (casting doubt, along the way, on the utility of overarching categories such as "socially isolated"). I show the significance of generational status, employment status, and neighborhood attachment to the likelihood of developing ties outside the neighborhood. I also uncover the persisting, multilayered conflict some second-generation Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood feel between local and external allegiances and social ties. This "labyrinth of loyalties" reveals much of the dilemma residents have between allying themselves to local causes and pursuing opportunities for moving up and moving out.

In chapter 8, I conclude by systematizing the approach I employed to open the black box. I elaborate on the usefulness of the "conditional" perspective adopted in the book. Social scientists tend to read community studies of single neighborhoods as roughly representative indicators of "the ghetto." Despite years of statistics courses teaching that samples of one are inappropriate for generalizations, we often want to generalize, to read such studies precisely as depictions of "the inner-city ghetto," perhaps because there are few such studies but also because of an implicit conception of the inner-city ghetto as a single, overarching institution that manifests itself in roughly the same way from city to city. Conversely, some social scientists explicitly read single case studies as particularistic tales with no legitimate universal applicability, as stories of a single neighborhood in a single place in a single time. Chapter 8 suggests that we should be concerned about generalization but that the common approach to generalization is inappropriate to open the black box. It presents an alternative that is neither universalist nor particularist, that takes the specific context of the neighborhood seriously while not succumbing to the scientific dangers of particularism. It suggests that case studies should be read as conditional accounts, in which the observed patterns of relations, no matter how consonant with standard expectations or stereotypes, are due not to neighborhood poverty in the abstract but to the specific conditions under which poverty manifested itself in the neighborhood—conditions that, nevertheless, may well manifest themselves in other settings.

The foregoing description should give an indication of what this book is and what it is not. It is not a community study. Community studies, such as Gans's aforementioned classic and most ethnographic studies of urban neighborhoods, explicitly provide readers a general or comprehensive snapshot of the community's life or social structure. This book does not. Community studies address issues as varied as teenage pregnancy, school attrition, unemployment, and crime—serious problems in this and many neighborhoods. By contrast, this book is focused exclusively on the relationship between concentrated poverty and social capital. Readers expecting a traditional "ethnography" of Villa Victoria are likely to be disappointed.

In addition, despite its persistent investigation of the historical foundations of present-day phenomena in the Villa, this book is not a history of the neighborhood, an enterprise best suited for a historian, not a sociologist. Moreover, even though the residents' identity or self-conception is examined where it is relevant to understanding social capital, this is not a study of "Puerto Rican identity" or "Latino identity" in the inner city. (I was born and raised in Panama, a small but diverse nation, and I often worry about attempts to subsume ethnic groups under a single comprehensive "identity." Though the lives of the Villa's residents have much to teach about migration among Puerto Ricans, they are but one case in one city.
among a rich and complex Puerto Rican culture. The lessons Villa Victoria offered are not predictions about Puerto Ricans in housing complexes or about poor neighborhoods as a whole. They offered, instead, hypotheses about how concentrated poverty affects social capital conditional on residents’ framing of their neighborhood, on the influence of cohorts, on the ecological characteristics of the neighborhood, on the prevalence of institutional resources, on generational status, on employment, and on the complexities of residents’ loyalties and sentiments toward where they live.

This book examines concretely the diverse ways individuals respond to living in concentrated poverty. I make use of that diversity to critique, to analyze closely and systematically, the standard assumptions about neighborhood poverty, to shed light on the black box—to help develop explanations that neither rely on worn-out preconceptions nor deny the harsh effects of poverty. What follows is an empirically based meditation on the prominent theories of social isolation, social organization, and community participation—a critique from the bottom up.

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How Does Neighborhood Poverty Affect Social Capital?

The problem is straightforward. How does neighborhood poverty affect social capital? In particular, by what mechanisms does living in a poor neighborhood decrease local community participation, reduce ties to the middle class, and weaken social ties among neighbors? Opening this black box of neighborhood poverty has proved both empirically and conceptually elusive.

The intention of this study was to use the case of Villa Victoria to help open the black box. It soon became clear, however, that this would require thinking differently about what a “ghetto” is and about how ethnographic case studies should complement large sample research on this question. To explain why divergent thinking is needed is, in a sense, my objective in this book. The following chapter frames what will follow by reviewing the recent literature on poor neighborhoods and by discussing several problems in identifying how neighborhood poverty affects people.

1. The term “social capital” has been subject to multiple definitions in sociology, political science, and economics (Banfield 1958; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995, 1996; Lin 1999; Sampson 1997; Portes 1998). It has been used to refer to the gains we obtain from our social ties, to the responsibilities they demand of us, to the norms they enforce, to the ties themselves, and to the presence of a high number of such ties among communities or neighborhoods. I will use, in this book, provide yet another definition, which would only confuse matters further. Instead I use the term merely as shorthand for the specific phenomena that have been studied under the general rubric of social capital, such as the number of middle-class friends and acquaintances poor individuals have, the trust they have toward others in their neighborhood, and the amount of time they devote to local volunteer activities.
The Effects of Neighborhood Poverty

After a relative lull during the 1970s and 1980s, research on the effects of neighborhood poverty increased at a rapid pace, driven in no small measure by Wilson's (1987) work (Small and Newman 2000; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). Although sociologists for years had believed that neighborhoods had important consequences for life outcomes, Wilson explicitly hypothesized that living in a poor neighborhood negatively affected a person's life chances independently of the person's own poverty level and offered plausible explanations for why this would be the case. The research, aided by influential early reviews such as Jencks and Mayer's (1990), centered on two basic questions. First, does neighborhood poverty affect life chances? If so, how?

Answering the first question, the "neighborhood effect" hypothesis became a major preoccupation for an interdisciplinary core of demographers, economists, quantitative sociologists, and developmental psychologists, all of whom quickly pointed out the previously underappreciated difficulty in demonstrating such an effect quantitatively. An especially difficult issue, one that economic and demographic studies tended to treat more seriously than sociological ones, was the issue of selection bias (Jencks and Mayer 1990). Since people likely to evince the social problems we worry about are also likely to end up in poor neighborhoods, it is difficult to ascertain statistically that such neighborhoods, independent of people's own characteristics, increase their likelihood of evincing these problems. Over the past fifteen years, researchers have produced better, more rigorous, and more convincing evidence on this question than had previously been the case. An important advance were the Moving to Opportunity experiments, in which residents applying for housing vouchers were randomly assigned either standard vouchers to be used anywhere (the control group) or vouchers to be used exclusively in nonpoor neighborhoods (the experimental group). Careful tests showed that residents in the second group did better on several outcomes, mostly regarding health and teen behavior, suggesting that neighborhood poverty did, indeed, have at least some negative effects on people (Kling 2000). Even these results are not sufficient for strong individualists, who remain unconvinced that neighborhood poverty makes enough of a difference to deserve serious attention. But most experts on this question seem increasingly convinced that neighborhood poverty does independently affect people in at least some of the ways we worry about (for reviews of this literature and its critical concerns, see Jencks and Mayer 1990; Furness and Hughes 1997; Gephart 1997; Sampson and Morenoff 1997; Small and Newman 2000; and Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002).5

The second question—How?—has proved difficult to answer. To be sure, one version of this problem has been the subject of sociological research in the United States since at least the 1960s, when scores of field-based books on life in poor urban neighborhoods were published (Gans 1962; Lewis 1965, 1968; Liebow 1967; Hannan 1969; Rainwater 1970). But as sociological scientific research has advanced, the questions have become more subtle and the potential pitfalls more numerous. An important problem is how to interpret what an ethnographer has observed in a particular neighborhood. Did a given outcome result from the neighborhood's poverty level or from another characteristic, such as its ethnic makeup or the cultural characteristics of its inhabitants? Can these variables be disentangled analytically? Was the neighborhood the ethnographer studied representative of ghettoes? (The term "ghetto" will refer, broadly, to an urban neighborhood with a high concentration of poor people, regardless of their ethnic makeup.) Earlier field researchers simply did not think in these terms. Many of them saw as their task to depict the ghetto to a middle class largely unaware of the ghetto's inner workings. Even the highly analytical thinkers, such as Hannan (1969), were more concerned with holistic depictions than with identifying neighborhood mechanisms in the way required to answer these questions.

In recent years, several hypotheses have been advanced to answer the how question. Researchers have argued that neighborhood poverty results in the lack of, for example, good role models (Wilson 1987; Cutler and Glaeser 1997), reduced social control and increased disorganization (Sampson and Groves 1989), and greater social isolation (Wilson 1987; Fernandez and Harris 1992), which then contribute to lower educational and occupational attainment, among many other outcomes (see Small and Newman 2001). When compared to research on the first question, research on mechanisms has been relatively scarce, even though a number

2. The tests were conducted in several cities. In Boston, applicants were assigned to one of three groups: Experimental, Control, and Control. Those in the first group received a voucher to be used only in a census tract with a poverty rate less than 20 percent, as well as counseling assistance. Those in the second received a voucher to be used anywhere. Those in the third received nothing (Katz, Kling, and Liebman 2000).

3. For a sampling of the hundreds of studies on the issue, see Clune (1992); Jencks and Peterson (1995); Rosenbaum and Popkin (1995); Moore and Feindel (1993); Brooks-Gunn, Denier, and Kelshon (1992); Elsen et al. (1992); Alter et al. (1994); Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Alter (1997); Cutler and Glaeser (1997); Duncan and Alter (1997); Duncan, Cutler, and Glaeser (1997); Furness and Hughes (1997); Gephart (1997); Sampson and Morenoff (1997); Small and Newman (2000); and Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002). For a recent critique, see Wachter (1997).
of new ethnographies have addressed one or another aspect of them indirectly (Danneier 1999; Patillo-McCoy 1999; Venkatesh 2000). Most researchers agree, however, that ethnographic research provides an important, if not the most important, tool in answering this question, for it has great leverage into understanding social processes.

For most of the sociologists, demographers, and economists working in this field, the objective of ethnographic research would be to use a case to uncover daily life in an average ghetto. The idea is that most ghettos share a host of characteristics and that by studying in depth the workings in one (representative) ghetto, one would understand how neighborhood poverty affects social capital in such neighborhoods in general. For example, a researcher might try to uncover the mechanisms by which neighborhood poverty decreases local participation. He or she would study a poor neighborhood and find, for example, that the high poverty levels reduce trust among neighbors. After conducting interviews and making observations, the researcher might find that this lack of trust translates into an unwillingness to participate in local voluntary activities: the ethnographer would depict, in depth, how people conceive of trust and make choices about involving themselves locally. On this basis, one would then hypothesize that neighborhood poverty decreases local participation (outcomes) by decreasing trust (mechanism). This could then be tested on a large sample.

This approach is relatively standard, but it did not work well in Villa Victoria. In fact, my research in the Villa indicated that this approach would fail to identify many of the important mechanisms by which neighborhood poverty affected social capital. It was clear that many of the intermediary mechanisms at work in the Villa probably not operate across all poor neighborhoods. These mechanisms evidently resulted from the fact that this was a poor neighborhood, and they could conceivably operate in other poor neighborhoods as well. But there were no mechanisms one would expect to find across all or even most poor neighborhoods. Furthermore, when compared to other ethnographies of poor neighborhoods—such as those of Gans (1962), Liebow (1967), Suttles (1968), Rainwater (1970), Anderson (1990, 1999), and Venkatesh (2000)—the idea of the Villa or of any neighborhood as a representative sample of the ghetto, as a 'typical' ghetto, seemed less and less tenable. By extension, the idea of the ghetto itself as a single institution seemed increasingly less tenable. 4

4. The most elaborate conception of the ghetto as an institution is Wacquant's (1997), an extension of Wilson's (1984); also Wacquant and Wilson (1995). The Villa is consistent with some of these observations but inconsistent with several of the conclusions of the top-down approach in Wacquant (1997).

The task that lies before me in the remainder of the book is to explain why this was the case and in what ways, then, one can use ethnographic case studies to inform large-scale cross-sectional research and to open the black box. The Villa posed both empirical and conceptual challenges to the existing work. The discussion below sets the stage for confronting these challenges by describing the main theories to be addressed. It is followed by comments on the issues of culture and agency, particularly difficult and arguably central questions in the study of poor neighborhoods.

Main Theories

Most of the issues to be covered in this book relate to the theories of social disorganization and social isolation, both of which are part of the distinguished research tradition of the Chicago school of sociology (Park, Burgess, and McKenzie 1925). Social disorganization theory argues that neighborhood poverty (among other factors) produces socially disorganized communities. The theory was originally developed to explain variations across neighborhoods in crime rates. In the 1940s, Shaw and McKay (1942, 1969) studied a cross section of neighborhoods in Chicago and showed that crime rates varied by the strength and organization of local institutions and the ability and willingness of residents to become involved on behalf of the common good and exercise informal social control. Neighborhoods were high in crime, the thought was, because they were "socially disorganized." Social disorganization, in turn, was caused by ethnic heterogeneity, residential instability, and high neighborhood poverty (see also Sampson 1988, 1991, 1999; Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Wilson 1995; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1995; Patillo-McCoy 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls 1999). Neighborhood poverty, therefore, would reduce social control, community participation, and the number of strong local institutions.

Throughout its history, the theory has had its critics, most of whom have argued that poor urban neighborhoods are not disorganized but, rather, are characterized by alternative forms of organization (Whyte 1943; Gans 1962; Suttles 1968; Wacquant 1997). Many critics relied on ethnographic studies, which seemed to paint pictures sharply at odds with the idea of disorganization (see Suss 1981; Gregory 1998). An early example is Whyte's (1943) study of a Boston "slum." Whyte writes, "It is customary for the sociologist to study the slum district in terms of 'social disorgan-
ration and to neglect to see that an area such as Cornerville has a complex and well-established organization of its own. . . . I found that in every group there was a hierarchical structure of social relations binding the individuals to one another and that the groups were also hierarchically related to one another” (1943, viii). The question becomes, then, how to reconcile the theory with ethnographic studies such as Whyte’s Street Corner Society (1943, 1955), Gans’s Urban Villagers (1960), and Suttles’s The Social Order of the Slum (1968)—all important works that take issue with the disorganization thesis. Is the theory out of touch with reality? Or are the field studies unrepresentative of poor neighborhoods?

Thus far, researchers have not produced very clear answers. Part of the difficulty is that social disorganization has been defined in too many different ways to constitute a falsifiable concept. The term has denoted attributes as varied as neighborhoods’ inability to supervise and control teens, the lack of mutual trust among neighbors, the low density and limited range of local social networks, the unwillingness to intervene on behalf of the common good, the lack of participation in formal voluntary associations, the lack of voluntary participation in informal activities, the absence of institutional resources in a neighborhood, and even the prevalence of crime, sometimes referred to as “disorder” (Wilson 1987, 1996; Sampson 1988, 1991, 1999; Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Wilson 1990; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1996; Patillo-McCoy 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls 1999; Rankin and Quane 2000). Each of the field studies said to question the thesis is consistent with at least one different definition of social disorganization. Moreover, neighborhood poverty could theoretically lead to each of these outcomes through a different mechanism.

This confusion strongly suggests abandoning searches for social disorganization or lack thereof in favor of studying specific phenomena that leave less room for interpretation. In this study, therefore, I will address not social disorganization but, instead, the more specific topics of the presence or absence of voluntary participation in neighborhood activities and the prevalence or scarcity of local institutional resources. The issue is to identify what about the concentration of poverty should lead to these outcomes. Studying these processes will also suggest a way to place ethnographic research within the context of wider theoretical and empirical work.

Social isolation theory argues that neighborhood poverty disconnects people from the mainstream or middle class. The basis of this theory is Wilson’s (1987) study of transformations in inner-city African American neighborhoods. In the past, he argued, such neighborhoods were racially segregated but class integrated, as poor blacks lived in close proximity to working- and middle-class blacks, enjoying the institutional resources and businesses the wealthier groups supported. After the economic shifts and Civil Rights victories of the 1960s and 1970s, the middle class left the inner city, leaving the poor with little or no contact with the American mainstream or middle class. In support of this thesis, several studies have found that living in a poor neighborhood reduces a person’s likelihood of having middle-class friends and acquaintances (Fernandez and Harris 1993; Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998; Rankin and Quane 2000; see also Kazana and Janowitz 1974; Huckfeldt 1983; Cohler and Dawson 1993; Kasinitz and Rosenberg 1996; Wilson 1996; Elliott 1999). However, a radically different literature disagrees that living in a poor neighborhood would have such effect—in fact, it suggests that the effects of neighborhoods, poor or not, on social networks are negligible. The “community isolated” perspective, as Wellman (1979) has labeled it, argues that social networks are not tied to physical neighborhoods in the ways they once were. Owing to rapid advances in transportation, communication, and technology, networks in contemporary urban societies are “sanitized” across neighborhoods and cities (see Wellman and Leighton 1979; Fischer 1982; Wellman 1999; but see also Wirth 1938; Fischer 1976). This alternative hypothesis suggests that we pay greater attention to the issue of mechanisms. Why, in our contemporary society, would merely living in a poor neighborhood limit our social networks? Unless residents of poor neighborhoods work, play, do all their shopping, and conduct all their business in their neighborhood, it is unclear why neighborhood poverty would have any effect, independent of their individual poverty, on their social networks. The question, therefore, demands further inquiry into the mechanisms behind the generation of social ties.

Understanding the mechanisms behind both social organization and social isolation theories may well require paying closer attention to culture and agency. These timeless sociological concerns become especially salient

5. An important literature reviewed but not central to this book examines networks within the poor rather than between the poor and the middle class, focusing largely on the family. See Stinchcomb 1976 and Burt 1977.

6. Note that both perspectives would agree that the being a poor person will decrease the likelihood of having middle-class ties. But only the social isolation thesis contends that living in a poor neighborhood, independent of one’s own poverty, will have such effect.
in the context of urban poverty, for both sociological and political reasons. In fact, however, how they operate within this context has remained in many ways elusive (Sampson and Wilson 1995; Small and Newman 2001).

Neighborhood Poverty and Culture

Until recently, structuralist sociologists were reluctant to examine the effects of culture. As Wilson (1987) argued, after the outcry that followed the Moynihan report (1965)—which argued that problems plaguing blacks were rooted in the deterioration of the black family—researchers had shied away from studying culture for fear of being accused of "blaming the victim" for their problems (Ryan 1976). Independent of politics, many sociologists in the social disorganization field seemed to be convinced that culture made little explanatory difference. In her devastating critique, Social Sources of Delinquency, Kornhauser (1978) chastised cultural deviance models for their logical inconsistency and lack of empirical support. But as the political environment has settled, the sociology of culture grown, and critiques such as Kornhauser's faded from memory, researchers have been increasingly willing to grant that, in some fashion, culture mediates or tempers or complicates the effects of neighborhood poverty on social capital. Still, most of them would agree that we do not know enough about how culture operates (see, esp., Sampson and Wilson 1995; Small and Newman 2001; and see also Nightingale 1993; Patterson 1997; Harrison and Huntington 2000).

The study of culture within urban poverty reached a peak during the late 1960s, with several works tackling the interaction between structure and culture in great detail (Lewis 1965, 1968; Liebow 1967; Banfield 1968; Valentine 1968; Hannan 1969). The current discourse on culture within urban poverty has only made small advances beyond these works, with some important exceptions (Wacquant 1992; MacLeod 1993; Bourdieu and Patterson 2000). It seems increasingly clear that students of the inner city should revisit culture more seriously. In any such endeavor, two issues are important.

The first is how to define, and think about, culture. Much of the discussion of culture defines it either, following Parsons, as a group's norms and values or, more generally, as a group's worldview. The former definition is probably the most common conception of culture in inner-city research. It is also the staple of conservative explanations about what is wrong with the inner city: it is the conception behind the arguments that urban blacks have low marriage and employment rates because they do not value the family unit, education, or hard work. By this account, a person's actions are caused by his or her values and normative orientation. But even though sociologists of urban poverty have done relatively little to improve on this conception, sociologists of culture have developed dozens of more sophisticated conceptions of culture—such as Bourdieu's (1977) "habitus," Coffman's (1986) "frames," Swidler's (1986) "tool kit" or "reper- toires," and Somers's (1992) and others' (Taylor 1989; Hart 1993) "narrative." They have shown that culture, in these varied ways, may affect a person's behavior independent of her or his norms and values. Indeed, the notion that people's actions are directed primarily by their norms and values is rather dated and simplistic. This does not preclude that values may affect certain actions, but it does suggest that reducing cultural analysis to the analysis of values is probably a mistake.

The second common conception of culture—that it encompassed a person's overall worldview—was implicit in sophisticated discussions by writers such as Hannan (1969), who offered a distinction between "mainstream" and " ghetto-specific" orientations and argued that both of these were present among most ghetto dwellers he studied. The strength of this approach is its ability to capture disparate elements of behavior observed in the inner city and organize them into a coherent whole. The weakness is its simplification. The distinction between mainstream and ghetto-specific behavior seems remarkably like that between behavior the middle class does and does not endorse. If so, then why do we need specialized terms to talk about conduct? Why not simply speak of good and bad behavior? The conception, regardless of terminology, is potentially tautological and difficult to falsify, precisely because it is all encompassing. The idea of worldviews makes generating clear processes tied to specific outcomes troublesome: Why, for example, should the same variable be equally valuable in assessing community participation and social isolation? The worldview concept, in talented hands such as Hannan's, can give a reader the feel for the community, but by attempting to encompass all aspects of observed behavior, it becomes proportionally weaker at explaining any single one.

A sociologist who has noted the weaknesses of the two preceding approaches to culture might be tempted to propose a third, perhaps based on current research in the sociology of culture. I might have, for instance, relied on that research to present the overall conception of culture to be used throughout the book. However, since it is already clear that most approaches to culture are better at explaining certain phenomena than
others, I have adopted a pragmatic approach in this book. When con-
fronted with a particular phenomenon I have observed in the neighbor-
hood, I ask whether a specific conception of culture, such as a narrative of
self or a cognitive framing of a situation, helps to understand it.

The second major issue is how to conceive of the relationship between
structure and culture. Most structuralist scholars who have agreed that
culture matters in the inner city still argue that structural conditions are
the ultimate cause of whatever cultural patterns are observed (e.g., Samp-
son and Wilson 1995). An important example is the oppositional culture
thesis, which posits that when certain minorities perceive an inability to
overcome structural poverty, they react by developing cultural attitudes
and values in opposition to those of the mainstream. If the mainstream
values education and hard work, these minorities will denigrate schooling
and unglamorous work, rejecting them as paths to upward mobility
(Ogbu 1977; Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Massey and Denton 1993). Thus,
evenghoughculturalattitudesdoaffect theacademicperformance of mi-
norities, these cultural attitudes are ultimately caused by structural condi-
tions. For scholars in this and similar traditions, the causal arrow points in
a single direction, from structure to culture to academic underperfor-
manolow social capital, or other unwanted outcomes. Perhaps for politi-
cal reasons, as in the past, scholars have been reluctant to examine, even in
theory, whether other causal relationships are possible, such as whether
culture may sometimes act in parallel with, not subordination to, struc-
ture. But if we assume, as stated above, that culture may affect behavior
through a number of different paths (values, frames, narratives, repor-
toires, etc.) and that it may affect different outcomes differently, then
there is no reason to assume that it should always be caused by structural
poverty. Thus, this study allows the possibility of alternative types of in-
teraction between structure and culture.

Neighborhood Poverty and Agency

The question of agency takes on a particular significance in poor urban
neighborhoods. Politically, the question has become, essentially, Whose
fault is it? Both political conservatives and strong individualists have
argued that all persons ultimately dictate their own fates and that by ne-

7. The most recent rigorous tests of this particular hypothesis have found little support for
it (Axinn/Scott and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1998).

8. Note that this position differs from conservatives on culture. Cultural conservatives ar-
gue that the poor have alternative cultural valuations, e.g., a different way to work ethic; but
agency conservatives argue that the poor have simply not taken agency, e.g., that they have been,
essentially, lazy even though they may theoretically believe in the work ethic. Indeed, conserva-
tives have tended this view much more forthrightly.
many individuals do not respond to structural conditions as predicted by the literature, reiterating these people, in statistical terms, to the empty term. To the extent we wish to open the black box, we cannot ignore that many people in poor neighborhoods do the opposite of what they theoretically would be expected to do.

This is especially important because people do, in fact, respond to neighborhood poverty in widely diverse ways. In fact, as Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002, 466) write in a recent review of the literature, "more of the variance in almost any outcome lies within rather than between neighborhoods" (see also Cook, Shagle, and Defrancisco 1997). Since theories have relatively little to say about these differences, they seem removed from reality. How does one conceive of an intermediating mechanism if the outcome varies widely within poor neighborhoods? Such a mechanism can be conceptualized, I will suggest, in part by incorporating that variation into theories about how the mechanisms operate.

This study addresses that variation.

The second issue—the role of choice in sociological explanations—is intimately related. Of concern is how to reconcile these structural theories with the fact that individuals make choices about, for instance, whether to participate in neighborhood activities and their networks. Is it that neighborhood poverty only affects those individuals who fail to make choices? Or that it affects people who make choices differently from those who do not? Should choice even be studied sociologically, or is it, essentially, the nonsociological issue of free will?

In addressing these questions, it is helpful to think of choice as an issue of motivation and to ask what affects motivation, as some sociologists studying social movements have done (Snow and Benford 1992; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). For example, some (though not all) of the work on narrative theory has made great strides in conceptualizing the relationship between narrative and action while avoiding relativistic or unverifiable explanations (Taylor 1985; Hart 1992; Somers 1993; Somers and Gibson 1994). Narrative theory suggests that individuals understand their lives in terms of narratives with ongoing and complex plots and that they act not when their actions are rational but when the actions accord with such narratives. Seemingly irrational acts are understandable if we know enough about the narrative a person has of him-or herself. I examine, in the chapters ahead, whether conceiving of choice within the context of motivation improves our sociological understanding of agency among residents of poor neighborhoods.

Basic Approach

My focus in this book are the mechanisms by which neighborhood poverty in Villa Victoria affected local community participation and the residents’ social ties to the middle class and to one another, paying special attention to culture, agency, and variation in responses to poverty. I argue that a better way to understand how neighborhood poverty affects social capital in particular and life chances in general is to adopt a “conditional” approach to what is often called the ghetto. The key to this approach is to use not commonality but variation as the foundation for the analysis.

The standard approach, by design, searches for mechanisms to be found in the typical or statistically average poor neighborhood, though this is not always stated explicitly. Reconsider the example at the beginning of the chapter. Cross-sectional research has shown that neighborhood poverty is associated with low local participation. Thus, a researcher would search for a neighborhood that is more or less representative of the ghetto (i.e., one with low local participation). Then, after identifying “trust” as a mechanism linking neighborhood poverty to a lack of local participation, the researcher would hypothesize that the average poor neighborhood evinces a lack of trust, leading to decreased participation.

The assumption is that the important mechanism or mechanisms are likely to be found across most poor neighborhoods or, alternatively, in the statistically average poor neighborhood—that is, that these mechanisms operate in a given poor neighborhood regardless of its particular context. I make no attempt here to refute that some mechanisms may, in fact, operate across most poor neighborhoods or within the statistically average poor neighborhood. But I show that many of the most important mechanisms will probably not be uncovered by relying exclusively on the standard approach.

I take a different approach. I elect not to choose, as a starting point, that neighborhood poverty is associated with low social capital (in whatever form) but, instead, that neighborhood poverty is sometimes associated with low social capital and sometimes not—and then ask why. The conditions differentiating the two outcomes (low social capital vs. not) are the key to what engenders the association of neighborhood poverty with low social capital. This assumption will guide analyses at the individual and the neighborhood levels. At the individual level, the assumption is that within any given neighborhood some people will have low social capital and some will not and that this variation is not random. At the neighbor-
hood level, I have assumed that two equally poor neighborhoods will evince different levels of social capital and that this variation is also not random. Since this is a single-neighborhood study, systematic study of variation across neighborhoods could not be undertaken, but the case of Villa Victoria can be compared to published field studies to generate hypotheses about the nature of the conditions that cause dissimilarities in social capital. In addition, I assess whether variation over time can be used to the same benefit. This approach will, I hope, uncover much about how neighborhood poverty affects people, while helping to clarify our current thinking about these processes.

TWO

Villa Victoria and Boston’s South End

We shall not be moved from Park St. — EMERGENCY TENANTS’ COUNCIL

Tremont Street

In the spring of 2001, having lived in the South End for one year and studied it for two, I tried to imagine what impression the neighborhood might make on a first-time observer. Every observer, I knew, would see the neighborhood through her particular perceptual lenses, but certain aspects of the neighborhood would probably impress anyone.1 I reminisced about what I had witnessed over the past few years, picturing the red brick walkways and cobblestoned streets, brownstones, townhouses, and ten-story housing projects, children on bicycles, elders with canes, and the yuppies, blacks, Latinos, and b-boys whose lives and daily rhythms I had studied and recorded in my notes.2 Above all, I remembered the South End as a street, as one particular street: Tremont, the main thoroughfare running the length of the neighborhood. There was hardly any aspect of the neighborhood’s culture, landscape, and people one could not witness on Tremont; the street epitomized the neighborhood. What first impressed, I

1. Any ethnographic description is both partial and positional, conditioned by the experiences and characteristics of the observer. Deciding how subjectively, then, to describe one’s observations has been the subject of much debate (Clifford and Marcus 1986). This book has little to add to this debate, and the decision here has been more pragmatic than theoretical. Except in some instances where it clearly afflicts the understanding of the phenomenon at hand, I will spend little time discussing how respondents viewed me or how a different observer might have witnessed the same events differently. Though not critical, such a discussion would distract from the objectives of the work. Furthermore, I have attempted to compare much of what I observed and was told by respondents with data from other sources, such as archives, the census, and published biographies, as discussed in the appendix. Nonetheless, readers should bear in mind the conditional nature of my or anyone else’s description of the neighborhood.

2. Because is a colloquial term for Puerto Ricans.