

Researcher explores sustainable ties among the poor in Philadelphia-based organization

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Studies document two common realities for the poor – either they rely on a dense network of closely connected and supportive kin or, in the absence of such a network, establish fleeting, disposable ties with strangers, says the assistant professor of sociology at Rutgers University–Camden.

However, Mazelis argues, she has found evidence of yet another "in-

between" category of support through [social ties](#), a type of non-kin social tie with greater longevity than disposable ties. These bonds are based on a mutual understanding of support, often take on familial roles, and function according to set norms of reciprocity.

The researcher discovered the nature and depth of these sustainable ties through a comprehensive study on the Kensington Welfare Rights Union (KWRU), an organization based in the North Philadelphia neighborhood of Kensington. Mazelis documents her findings in a chapter titled "Social Ties Among the Poor in a Neoliberal Capitalist Society," in the forthcoming *Handbook of Poverty in the United States* from Routledge Press. She is currently writing a book manuscript as well, titled *Our Strength is in Our Unity: Sustainable Ties Among the Poor*.

"While others have found non-kin ties arising from connections to neighborhood institutions, I found lasting social ties in a situation of dire poverty that might have enabled disposable ties, if not for the role of the Kensington Welfare Rights Union," says the Rutgers–Camden researcher.

As Mazelis succinctly describes, KWRU's activist members openly discuss their poverty and criticize the sources. Comprised mostly of women, the group founded an organization called the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign, which travels throughout the world speaking out against poverty. On the local front, members engage in protests to secure housing for the homeless and offer informational and practical support to those in need.

Over a two-year period, Mazelis observed and conducted in-depth interviews with 25 members of KWRU. The respondents ranged in age from 21 to 59 and were divided almost evenly among the racial/ethnic groups of the organization's members – nine respondents were African American, eight were Latina, and eight were Caucasian. She also

interviewed 25 women who were not in KWRU (with the same racial/ethnic composition).

Among her findings, Mazelis says that norms of reciprocity, the notion that people who have been helped are obligated to help others, function as a form of payment within the organization. KWRU relies on members to offer their time and resources in order to satisfy the norms that have been established. Leaders expect members to participate in various ways, whether it is on a small scale, such as helping out in the office, or in a larger capacity, such as attending rallies or demonstrations. Mazelis explores this topic in greater detail in a research article, titled "I got to try to give back: How Reciprocity Norms in a Poor People's Organization Influence Members' Social Capital," forthcoming in the *Journal of Poverty*.

According to the Rutgers–Camden researcher, members develop sustainable ties based on a mutual agreement to help one another. In some instances, these relationships have extended beyond the framework of the organization and taken on familial roles. For example, one respondent reported having another member help her with the laundry, while another respondent acknowledged having several members of the group authorized to pick up her child from school.

Conversely, Mazelis notes, members who choose to leave the group have shown the negative effects of losing these sustainable ties. For instance, she describes one former member living in some of the worst conditions that she had observed. "Helen," Mazelis explains, thought that the group demanded more of her than what she had gotten in return and decided that she was better off dealing with her problems on her own. But rather than improve, her living conditions worsened since leaving the group. "I can only speculate that her life might be better if she had maintained KWRU membership and the access to social capital it offered," Mazelis writes.

Similarly, Mazelis explains, the organization "takes reciprocity norms seriously," denying assistance and severing ties to those members who don't fulfill these norms. She maintains that, although losing the connection to KWRU prevents such cast-off members from maintaining sustainable ties, enforcing these norms preserves their importance as a vital form of social capital within the organization.

Mazelis emphasizes that, although KWRU is instrumental in forging and strengthening bonds among strangers, lasting ties are also with the organization itself. Consequently, when members leave, they are replaced by new members with whom others forge these bonds.

She cites prior research showing that many institutions created to support the poor, such as welfare offices and food pantries, are sites where disposable ties may be formed. However, because KWRU "requires something of its members, rather than simply providing services to them," she writes, "it creates social ties in which it is embedded as an organization, thereby strengthening the tenuous bonds between new acquaintances."

Mazelis concludes that social ties will continue to have an impact on the poor's ability to survive. She maintains that, although it is difficult to determine if similar organizations can develop and flourish, such groups offer a "communal assistance" that is different than what family ties or social-service agencies can offer. "They provide a source of [social capital](#) similar to what disposable ties offer, but with greater stability," she writes.

Provided by Rutgers University

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