FIVE

## *Local Caring*

## Social Capital and Social Responsibility in New York's Minority Neighborhoods

Katherine S. Newman

Robert Putnam's much discussed article, "Bowling Alone" (1995), has prompted a burst of concern over the diminishing involvement of Americans in community groups that build social capital, including voluntary organizations, churches, parent-teacher associations, and the like. Erosion of the participatory spirit has been blamed upon working mothers no longer available to staff the PTA, working fathers running to stay one step ahead of the downsizing ax and therefore unable to coach the soccer league, and the excessive materialism of an American middle class more concerned about the models of their cars than the health of their community institutions. Even the lowly television has been blamed for privatizing recreation, making couch potatoes of those who would otherwise be drawn to neighborhood activities. Diminished social ties, we are told, produce weak forms of solidarity and even weaker levels of trust or engagement in public institutions (e.g., government).

Nowhere has the worry over declining social capital been keener than in studies of American ghettos. Beginning with James Coleman's seminal article, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital" (1988), and continuing with William Julius Wilson's arresting portraits of neighborhood disintegration (1987, 1996), researchers have suggested that poor minorities are suffering the consequences of a withdrawal from public life. Coleman argues that declining parental participation in schooling reduces a child's human capital (individual skills or formal credentials) because parents lack the resources that derive from the social ties with others (especially fellow parents and teachers) that are necessary to monitor and influence a child's educational performance. Wilson points to the erosion of economic opportunity in inner-city communities, which opens up avenues for the dangerous trades (drugs, guns) and the violent behavior that goes with them) and forces families to remain in the privacy of their homes for safety's sake. The more law-abiding families withdraw, the more the institutions they once bolstered (from churches to stores) depart the scene. An empty

"commons" is the death knell for social capital in the inner city, and all its residents pay the price.

For both Coleman and Wilson—to name only two sociologists who have written on this topic—social capital is a two-sided medium. It is one part participation in formal or informal organizations and one part personal, social ties with family, friends, and neighbors. Indeed, the two aspects of social capital are thought to go hand in hand: folks who are active in the first domain tend to be equally engaged in the second. Social responsibility, the theme of this volume, might be thought of as the moral force that drives individuals to engage in the participatory activities essential for the creation and sustenance of social capital. If individuals feel morally compelled to give of themselves to causes, organizations, or institutions that stand outside their own narrow interests, then, if Coleman and Wilson are right, they will also flourish in the more private sphere of personal relations. But the driving force here remains connecting to others in organizations and the push factor is a sense that social responsibility is morally worthy (however much it may also be instrumentally valuable for the health of one's community).

In this chapter, I argue that for inner-city communities, participation in formal organizations and financial donations may not constitute the best barometers of social responsibility. Measures that rely upon participation in formal institutions—giving money, volunteering in some official capacity—define a form of social responsibility which may well predominate among middle-class families. Among the comparatively well heeled, the financial resources to support philanthropic generosity are available, and participation in voluntary organizations is expected as a culturally approved signal of public engagement. For urban minorities, particularly the poor among them, social responsibility is expressed in a different form, one that is paradoxically privatized and directed not at the general social good, but at those defined as "one's own." Men and women living in problematic neighborhoods regard the daunting task of raising their children, or tending to the safety of the streets, as both a personal obligation *and* a contribution to the well-being of society as a whole.

The borders of community are narrowly circumscribed by urban minorities. Drawing boundaries around the people to whom one owes selfless acts is a complex process, moving out from the immediate family, to the surrounding neighborhood, to groups of people who occupy similar positions in the racial or economic hierarchy. Formal organiza-

tions, particularly the church, can become a vehicle for urban minorities to express commitment to others, but more often than not, private behavior and informal practices fulfill the responsibility which ethnoracially or economically defined groups feel for their members.

The emphasis in this chapter lies only partly on socially responsible *behavior*. I focus equally on the *subjective* dimension of obligation and belonging, on the ways urban minority families define their position in a stratified society. Any complete understanding of social responsibility involves this deeper sense of to whom that responsibility is owed. I explore these issues drawing upon a set of qualitative interviews conducted in New York City in 1995–96 as an offshoot of a special survey of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans sponsored by the MacArthur Foundation's Network on Successful Midlife Development. Nine hundred respondents, one-third from each of these ethnic groups, completed a face-to-face survey, which overlapped on many items with the nationwide MIDUS sample. A representative subset of this New York population, totaling one hundred in all, were then recontacted for lengthy life history interviews, conducted in Spanish or English in the respondents' homes.[1] Selected demographic characteristics of this qualitative sample compared to the entire New York sample are provided in table 5.1.[2]

This chapter draws primarily upon the portion of the qualitative interview that focused on social responsibility, but is informed by the perspectives of these African American, Puerto Rican and Dominican midlife adults on the problems they encounter raising families in poor neighborhoods and the complexities of living in a racially stratified society. Only when we situate these families in their community context can we fully appreciate how they define the character of their responsibilities toward others and the motives that move them to live up to these commitments.

Mapping the contours of social responsibility is most easily and parsimoniously done by radiating out from the most private sphere of the family, to the neighborhood, to social groups defined by race and ethnicity. This is both a logical arrangement and, as it happens, the map that most accurately describes the social spheres of participation and self-definition that make the most sense out of the data we gathered. Within each concentric circle, beginning with the family and ending with groups defined by national origin or race, we must ask how the respondent relates cultural position to social obligation.

TABLE 5.1 Comparative Characteristics of the New York City Sample and the Qualitative Sample

| | New York City Sample (N = 900) | Qualitative Sample (N = 100) |
|---|---|---|
| Average age | 44.2 | 43.6 |
| Gender (%male) | 50.6 | 41.8 |
| Ethnicity (%) | | |
| Black | 37.6 | 34.7 |
| Dominican | 31.1 | 33.7 |
| Puerto Rican | 31.3 | 31.6 |
| Employment status (%) | | |
| Employed | 45.9 | 52.1 |
| Unemployed | 11.9 | 8.2 |
| Immigrant status (%) | | |
| U.S. born | 53.2 | 53.1 |
| Immigrated < 18 years old | 10.4 | 9.2 |
| Immigrated 18+ years old | 28.7 | 27.5 |
| Neighborhood type (%) | | |
| 30% or more white | 10.5 | 9.2 |
| 51% or more own ethnic group | 35.0 | 36.7 |
| Mixed | 54.3 | 54.1 |
| Mean neighborhood income | $27,306 | $27,016 |
| Public aid (%) | | |
| AFDC | | |
| African Americans | — | 15 |
| Puerto Ricans | — | 27 |
| Dominicans | — | 22 |
| SSI | | |
| African Americans | — | 15 |
| Puerto Ricans | — | 24 |
| Dominicans | — | 22 |

## FAMILY VALUES: SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE CHILDREARING

Elsewhere in this volume, Alice Rossi has suggested that attending to family obligations, particularly those that bind the three living generations of child-parent-grandparent, is an important facet of social responsibility. These are fairly universal definitions of intergenerational obligation, though they may be met by financial outlays among middle-class families (for elder care or child care) and by time outlays by those less affluent (see chapter 3). But it would probably be fair to say that most middle-class, midlife Americans define these responsibilities as private, primarily oriented toward the quality of family life and the personal obligations generations owe to one another.

---

Among the black and Latino New Yorkers studied for this chapter, however, childrearing is understood both as a personal responsibility and as a *public* obligation. For them, bringing up the kids is a contribution to the well-being of a community, particularly when one can point to a host of families who have not followed through, leaving neighbors and strangers to contend with the consequences of their parental failures. This is more than a subtle difference. Although middle-class families consider parental "work" as a serious moral obligation, its social character is not as well developed. Parents raise their children because their private lives are circumscribed by these responsibilities. In poorer communities, taking care of one's children is almost as much an obligation to the peace, security, and well-being of neighbors and fellow community members as it is to the success and comfort of the next generation in the family.

Rosa Picante is a thirty-eight-year-old Dominican immigrant living in a poor neighborhood on Manhattan's upper west side. She does not have the time for volunteer work, nor does she have the resources or the inclination to donate money to charity, apart from an occasional contribution to her parish. If Rosa were to complete the MIDUS questionnaire, she would score low on many indices of social responsibility. Yet she sees herself as a good citizen of her community because she has taken care of her private responsibilities and in so doing, contributes in positive ways to the quality of life of her neighbors and friends. "Bring your children up with an education, yes, you are helping the community. Helping the society, so that the area that you live in is not so bad. Because if everyone contributes his part to do something good on their own, they are doing something for the community." Jason Norwald, a thirty-two-year-old African American who works as an assistant teacher, would agree that taking responsibility for family members is key for both personal integrity and public order: "If something were to happen to my brother and his wife, there would be no question as to where their children would go.... The children would be my responsibility. I don't have a problem with that. My parents would be largely my responsibility.... My brother and I would probably share the responsibility for my parents, for our parents. My aunt—there was never a question.... I think that's how we have to look at it. They took care of me when I was young, so, I should take care of them now that they're old." Here Jason expresses a social contract between generations that, at one level, has nothing to do with the world outside close kin. But he defines his obligations in contrast to the way he perceives more affluent

families shuffling their older relatives off to nursing homes where they have no family ties. He rejects this path as an abrogation of a contract between generations. In accepting his personal responsibilities to care for his own, he feels that he also makes good on a commitment to keep his family business out of the "burden column" for the rest of society. In short, for urban minorities, private acts—caring for the elderly, raising children, monitoring public behavior on the streets around their homes, visiting with a child's teacher—take on a larger resonance as examples of commitment to the community.

How does private conduct come to be defined as socially responsible behavior? Families who do not do their part, who let their children run wild, sow the seeds of neighborhood decline. In communities facing a daily onslaught of petty crime, disorderly or belligerent conduct, graffiti, and broken windows, the stable, law-abiding, respectable families who dominate the local culture recognize that the environmental problems they face are "homegrown." [3] Little credence is given to the liberal position that society has failed urban youth (through poor schools, cutbacks in social policy, and the like). Instead, the view that childrearing is a family's moral responsibility takes center stage.

Adults like Rosa and Jason believe that young troublemakers are the end product of neglectful parents who let the community down when they let their children run wild. The consequences of private irresponsibility spill out into public spaces. For this reason the community has an immediate interest in domains that would be considered no one else's business in most suburban settings. As Mason Bradley, an African American resident of Brooklyn put it: "You can be responsible for the community just by taking care of things at home. This way the community is not bothered with some of your own home problems, things that can be stopped at home such as dealing with the children, curbing their attitudes, things such as that. So this way, if you trained your child correctly at home, when he comes out into the community someone else will not have to . . . curb your child."

The reverse argument also holds in ghetto life. Families bound by social norms, who raise their children to "do right," express a commitment to the social good, to the protection of their communities from behavior that would—absent their vigilance—degrade the quality of life in inner-city neighborhoods. The private *becomes* public in this very special sense, and the task of raising children becomes an expression of commitment to the well-being of the neighborhood as well to the family. The well-behaved child is subtracted from

the ledger of potential problem cases that residents of poor blocks must contend with. Since that ledger can be long, the source of much daily grief for families struggling to live in peace in the midst of run-down conditions, the kudos that accrues to the responsible parent is significant.

Middle-class families also hold themselves accountable for their children's behavior. But since they are blessed, on the whole, with orderly neighborhoods and stable social institutions, they are less likely to create a public problem if they neglect private family obligations. A child who grows up a stain on his family's honor in suburban America is a matter of personal shame. He is less likely to be a threat to his neighbors. [4]

Credit for successful childrearing is given where it is due in part because inner-city parents understand that the obstacles in the way of producing children who behave themselves are many and very serious. [5] Suburban parents can expect their children to develop in acceptable ways until they confront the temptations of casual drug use or driving under the influence, which usually do not present themselves until the latter years of high school. Even there, the normative framework of expectations (for academic achievement, conventional behavior) and the affluence that permits a consumerist life shield most suburban teens from serious involvement with crime or delinquency.

The vast majority of inner-city teenagers are equally conventional in their behavior, portraits of a deviant underclass notwithstanding. Yet the potholes in the road to adulthood they confront are certainly larger than those facing suburban youth (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993). Reaching a positive end does not come about so easily, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of inner-city teens arrive at that destination. Drug dealers with a lot of spare cash to flash around are not in short supply, yet neither are church-going families. Presented with both destructive role models and positive ones, poor youth in segregated enclaves face pressures to choose between alternatives that most middle-class teenagers never encounter.

Because the obstacles to a conventional adulthood are considerable, families that navigate these waters successfully are looked upon as success stories, people who have surmounted the odds. Their efforts to leap those hurdles—to raise their children without them succumbing to negative influences—are therefore culturally defined as an expression of social responsibility toward the surrounding community as well as a personal achievement.

## Expanding the Circle

The term "community" has been invoked in myriad ways to refer to groups that feel a degree of mutual obligation and trust. Among the African Americans, Dominicans, and Puerto Ricans we interviewed, the boundaries of social solidarity are complex and shifting. To understand what social responsibility means to these urban dwellers, we must explore the range of communities with which they identify and toward whom they feel a sense of obligation.

At the most intimate level, "community" refers to the families and friends who live nearby. These are the people to whom one owes primary allegiance, for whom members should express social responsibility. Lucia Noventa was brought to New York from Puerto Rico when she was six months old. As a married woman with four children, ages three to nineteen, Lucia draws clear boundaries around her obligations. They stretch only as far as her own family: "The only obligation that I have is to my kids and to my husband. That's it, and of course, God forbid, to my mamma. My mother, first God, then my mother. My obligation is to my kids. They didn't ask me to bring them into this world. I brought them in. So, as long as I am physically able, I am obligated to give [to] them, to provide for them, so that they can grow up and provide for themselves." Lucia sees her first task as insuring her children's survival, making sure they have a roof over their heads. Her independence reflects the experience of the working poor who know all too well that securing the well-being of the next generation is not an easy task. It cannot be taken for granted that they will be safe; it is a duty that requires constant vigilance.

But her desire for independence extends beyond her obligation to take care of her children. It expands to encompass the responsibility she has for making sure that she will not become a burden to them in her old age: "I am not asking for them, when I grow older, 'Oh, you gotta give me something from your paychecks.' 'If you want to help me out, you help me out. If you don't want to, power to you.'" Lucia's comments reflect the darker side of the immigration experience. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who come from cultures that emphasize familial solidarity, the obligations that bind generations together, confront an American code that values autonomy, that subtracts from the social contract between generations the duty to provide financially.[6] Affection and respect are meant to be unhinged from economic responsibility.

These are truly foreign ideas in the eyes of other cultures, and they come hard to those who arrive on American shores.

Carol Stack's classic work, *All Our Kin* (1974), explores much the same tension among African Americans in the neighborhood she calls the "Flats," a segregated and poor community in southern Illinois. Descendants of the generation that migrated out of the rural towns of Mississippi and Alabama on their way to the northern metropolis of Chicago, the residents of the Flats confront poverty with extended and fictive kin ties that provide a private safety net. Goods and money circulate from one household to another, insuring some protection against fluctuating resources (aid checks cut off, jobs lost). "What goes around, comes around," Stack's informants explain: givers become receivers, building up mutual obligations over time which insure a modicum of security. But the cost of such an arrangement is serious: it puts a brake on the upward mobility of individuals enmeshed in the web of dense ties, for they cannot hoard resources against the claims of "partners" if they expect to be able to ask for help in the future.

Social responsibility in the Flats extends outward from the natal household to encompass extended family and close friends, but it is always cross-cut by the thoroughly American desire to break free and prosper independently. The tension is ever-present when good fortune shines on one individual and he or she must decide whether to break from the leveling power of the social network or rest within, an insurance policy against future need.

For many of the immigrant and native-born poor in New York, a similar drama plays itself out as families contend with the shifting social norms that define the relations among their members. For Lucia Noventa, the tide has shifted in favor of independence, of grooming her children to make it on their own, with the hope that they will not forget who made their good fortune possible: "I want to instill in them a sense of family, the sense of self-confidence in themselves. Otherwise, who am I going to be obligated to? I am looking for my best work if I can [get it]. I will give it my best effort, but I am not going to be obligated [to the workplace]. My obligation is to my kids, and once they grow up then they are obligated to make sure that they can take care of themselves."

This volume emphasizes the importance of caregiving and nurturing across the generations as a form of social responsibility. For low income families, these obligations take on additional weight. Not only are

these moral imperatives, they are often the only source of support that aging parents can expect to receive. Men and women who have spent a lifetime in irregular employment or the nontaxed economy (e.g., black and Latina women who work as domestics) often lack pensions, access to social security, and medical care. Moreover, because poverty leaves its traces in poor health, the minority elderly are frequently not so old. Illnesses that more affluent Americans expect to see develop in their sixties and seventies surface among inner-city adults in their fifties (Geronimus 1995). Demands for their care fall on the shoulders of their family members both in accordance with custom and because there are few other alternatives. The resources that permit middle-class and wealthy families to buy services—home aids, nursing care, assisted living—are not available.

I suggest we should understand caregiving within families somewhat differently at the low income end of the spectrum. To the extent that we believe society bears some obligation toward the support of the elderly (expressed through social security, Medicare, pensions, and other benefits), it should be clear that the substitutional character of family care among the poor is more than a private act. It is a form of social responsibility.

## NEIGHBORS

Poor neighborhoods in New York have no shortage of problems. Almost everyone in our study complained of robberies, drug users and drug pushers, unemployment, and families that do too little to control their children's behavior. The literature on the urban underclass suggests that under these circumstances, the natural response is to withdraw into private spaces, ceding the public domain to the negative elements (Anderson 1999). In some of the nation's tougher housing projects, this isolation strategy may predominate (Venkatesh 1997)—hardly a recipe for social responsibility.

Yet in the barrios and black ghettos of Harlem, the South Bronx, and Bedford-Stuyvesant, communal efforts have developed that reflect an outward-turning commitment to the stability and safety of the neighborhood. Housing projects have established tenant patrols, self-imposed curfews, and escort services for the elderly in an effort to reduce the burdens of crime. These informal activities take time, energy, and an underlying social solidarity that transcends the privacy of households.

Missy Darden, a black woman in her late fifties, has been mugged a

time or two. The experience motivated her to do something to help herself and others: "I tried to start a civilian patrol and a buddy system within the neighborhood or the complex I live in. People [who have to come home from work] late at night get together and have a telephone chain of people who are coming in at the same hours so people come in together. A person wouldn't have to walk down the street by themselves." Neighborhood watch groups, informal escort services, and the like provide a vehicle to educate residents about the best way to avoid victimization. As Missy explains: "You can wear certain items or walk a certain way. Having been a victim of muggings more than once, I've noticed that on those occasions [I was saying], 'Here I am.' I had to learn to walk like I was nuts, talking to myself and waving, and that sort of deterred people from bothering me. I really try to warn people or make them aware that certain things they do, certain things they can avoid, like walking in dark places or places that happen to be deserted, being aware of who's around you. That doesn't always work, but it's a start." Missy is confident this will make her neighbors less vulnerable and sees it as her obligation to educate them in protective strategies. But she also sees the local patrols as a vehicle for rallying the troops. Missy realizes that the only way she will see more cops on the beat in her neighborhood is to amass public support and pressure that will be hard for officials to ignore.

Missy has also organized a yearly fair in her housing complex, which brings the neighbors together in an effort to raise some money: "Every year I have this [event] on the plaza where we sell table space. I even include the young people. . . . Once people pay for their table space, whatever they earn after that belongs to them. I have culture groups come in dancing. . . . It's not a big money-making thing, but it's something to have people doing something together within the complex and the neighborhood." Missy follows up by taking groups of young people to local African festivals. "Last year," she remembers, "I had about fifteen of them with me, teenagers, young people that are hanging around." Missy prefers to have them involved in things around their community, "cultural things," she says, "rather than just hanging out."

Missy is not alone in her efforts. Juana Herrera, a Dominican immigrant in her early sixties, has many of the same concerns and has moved toward the same neighborhood-based solutions: "[What we have to do is] unite and have reunions with the community and the police. Now we are doing that because [robberies] were occurring here. The Mexicans were being assaulted when they came from work late at night. The

poor things, with all the working hard they have to do, so that others try to take it away from them!" In studies of Chicago neighborhoods, Robert Sampson and his colleagues have found that, controlling for median income and ethnic composition, neighborhoods that exhibit high levels of social capital—dense networks and frequent interaction—suffer considerably lower levels of crime and disorder than those where residents are more anomic (*New York Times* 1997).

Social responsibility, expressed in the form of neighborhood-based solidarity, works. This lesson has not been lost on Jason Norwald, who has observed the idea in practice: "There are floors that have break-ins, and there are floors that don't—simply because the neighbors watch out for each other. Not an organized—not necessarily organized kind of thing, but, 'Hey, that doesn't sound like Rose at the door. So let me see who's out there.' With, of course, you being aware of the possibility of putting yourself in danger, but still looking out for the neighbor." There are types of social responsibility at the neighborhood level that are not expressed in organized form. Sentiments of solidarity surface as personal practices of reciprocity, as Henry Montez, a native New Yorker of Puerto Rican descent, reports: "I think neighbors should look out for one another, for the elderly. My neighbors love me. Whenever they ask me for something, I will try to help them out. [Some people] will try to take advantage of me. But if you are nice people and I see you need help, well, . . . what goes around comes around. Today you have money and tomorrow you have nothing. Today you are healthy and tomorrow you are sick. [So you have to help others.]" Henry's work brings him into contact with many of his neighbors. While he always hopes to be paid for his work, he also provides "pro bono" services to elderly Puerto Ricans in his Brooklyn neighborhood who cannot afford to pay for the plumbing help they need. Henry knows that the good he does will be rewarded in the future and considers this kind of reciprocity both a cultural obligation and a good investment.

Donna Thornton, a seventy-one-year-old African American who was born and raised in New York, sees the same advantages in being considerate and outgoing toward people she knows mainly by sight: "You can be friendly to people as you see them. When I go to school, I see these people every morning, and I try to say hello and good morning to them, because they're taking the kids. I don't know them but they're going the same way taking the kids to school. This way you get to know people. . . . And it's good to know people in the neighborhood because when you're walking down and something [bad] is happening,

someone will say, that's Miss so-and-so, the lady I know who lives on this block. And they'll sort of help you and protect you." This kind of reciprocal giving is a form of personal insurance, expressed in the form of ongoing ties between neighbors. The instrumental and strategic aspects of local ties are mixed in with sentiments of solidarity and time-honored forms of self-help. It "takes a village" to insure the viability of a neighborhood in these inner-city communities and the investment in building social capital is time consuming.

## RACE AND ETHNICITY

I have characterized neighborhoods as arenas within which social responsibility is expressed by poor minorities who recognize the redeeming, protective consequences of reciprocity and engagement. Yet these same enclaves can be divided by race and ethnicity. The poor are forced into areas with low housing costs and poor job opportunities, pitting groups against one another in the scramble for scarce resources. Where these conditions produce deep cleavages, solidarity develops inside ethnic and racial boundaries rather than across them.

Indeed, the MIDUS survey shows that, even after controlling for total household income, educational attainment, and home ownership, African Americans report lower ratings of safety and social cohesion in their neighborhoods than all other racial groups do. This undoubtedly reflects the toll that racial segregation is taking on neighborhoods and the relative lack of trust that characterizes poorer neighborhoods where even middle-income blacks are likely to live (Massey and Denton 1990). MIDUS also shows, however, that African Americans have more frequent social contact with their neighbors than other ethnic groups, even when controlling for levels of neighborhood safety, income, home ownership, and family size.[7] This suggests a level of in-group interaction in the national sample that is consistent with the New York area findings.

There is, of course, a long-standing tradition of self-help and inward-turning social responsibility in the African American community. Beginning with Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey and extending to Malcolm X and beyond, the notion that helping one's own—through a racially bounded church, a program of "buying black," or an organization like the Black Panthers—is a primary obligation. It contrasts with a more universal definition of civic commitment.

Similarly, immigrants are known for their propensity to foster the well-being of co-ethnics, beginning with the chain migration patterns

that bring relatives or former neighbors from their nations of origin to the receiving communities in the United States (Mahler 1994; Kasinitz 1992). Suspicion of outsiders, especially when the market (for housing, jobs, etc.) thrusts particular immigrant groups into competition with one another or with the native born, enhances group solidarity and complementary wariness toward nonmembers.

These forces surface in the form of strong and abiding sentiments that one's primary social responsibility lies in addressing the needs of one's own ethno-racial group. This definition of social responsibility must be distinguished from that which fosters engagement in the neighborhood, even though co-residents may also be defined by their common racial or ethnic heritage. Here I refer to the ways in which individuals identify themselves as members of a racial group that transcends neighborhood, city, or even personal acquaintance. Obligations flow between people who share a skin color, a national origin, or a common heritage of discrimination on account of language or appearance, whether or not they are personally known to each other.

Social responsibility toward one's race/ethnicity can be expressed as a hierarchy, leaving room for more universal commitments as well: first I serve my own, and then I can turn my attention toward outsiders. For others, the attitude is more exclusionary: I owe a great deal to my own and little to others. Either way, racial and ethnic groups turn inward toward the protection, sustenance, and promotion of the life chance of their members.

Irene Mandel, a forty-six-year-old assistant principal, has been an educator all her professional life. She is frankly nationalistic in her commitments, noting that she feels "responsible to African Americans." Her racially defined sense of social responsibility led her to change jobs so that she could act on this bounded commitment: "I left the school district that I taught in—Sheep's Head Bay. I was sent there when they were balancing racially. And I felt like I had a responsibility to come back to my neighborhood or a neighborhood similar to mine and share my expertise for the children and my attitude toward children's learning and the possibilities for [black] children." Irene does feel a general commitment to children as a whole; this is her motivation for being a teacher. But she sees the world in terms of racial groups and conceives of her responsibilities as flowing first to African American children.

Aida Gonzalez, a forty-six-year-old Dominican, shares Irene's feelings: "I feel responsible to my own group. Like for instance, if I can open a day care [home care] on a corner in a little apartment, I would try to get my own people to employ and to take care of. Even though I have Chinese and Indians and white. I would try to get more of [my own]."

The primacy of self-help is often driven by the view that ethnic communities, particularly inner-city black neighborhoods, are uniquely plagued by (or even targeted for) social pathologies like drug abuse and violence. It does not escape the notice of ghetto dwellers that drug dealers ply their trade in the ghettos and not on Park Avenue. They resent the fact that police corruption and abusive treatment is more often found in their communities than in middle-class enclaves. Hence, while a "race-conscious" nationalism can produce an inward-turning sense of social responsibility, so too can a feeling of victimization—indeed the two sentiments are not unrelated.

As Mason Bradley put the matter: "We [speak] to kids—underprivileged kids, that is—white, black, everybody under the rainbow. But I want to especially reach out my hand to people of color, those children, and let them know, 'Listen, you can do better.' . . . We have to stop promoting a lot of [bad] things that go on. This guy sells drugs, but [the kids think] it's okay. No, it is not okay. That is wrong. And we will not tolerate that in this neighborhood. . . . You take those drugs somewhere else! I love my people. I am a black man; I am going to stand up for the black woman and the black man. How can I truly call myself a black man, and you are out here poisoning my people, poisoning my children." Immigrants share the preoccupation of African Americans with self-help and racial solidarity. When asked to whom he feels obligated, Fred Moreno, a twenty-six-year-old Dominican college student, was quick to answer: "My Dominicans. I want us to have a power. I want us to have a say. I want us to be better than we are. That is something that motivates me, that drives me. Yeah." Fred moved to New York from the Republic when he was eight years old and has lived inside the barrio of Washington Heights ever since. His closest ties, from the family to peers, are contained within this ethnic enclave. Washington Heights is surrounded by other ethnic groups who are competitors for housing, jobs, and most other forms of opportunity. Fernando has learned from this ethnically segregated milieu that he should define himself in terms of his own people, rather than a pan-ethnic or American identity.

Cleaving to one's own is a natural response in neighborhoods that are divided by race or national origin. Even when residents face common problems and locate themselves (sociologically) by neighborhood, these divisions can be hard to surmount. Edna Carson, a black woman

whose parents migrated from North Carolina to Brooklyn, is raising a family of her own in a mixed community. Solidarity based on common location has proven elusive in her neighborhood: "You got to think where you're living in the neighborhood when people are from different places. A lot of them don't have their green cards, a lot of them don't have immigration cards, so you don't have a real lot of unity. You're just American Black and you've got your papers because you ain't never went nowhere, so you don't have that kind of unity with them because they're scared. You have Mexicans, you got Hispanics, and a lot of Dominicans—they don't have their papers. So they're not going to help you protect anything because they just want to stay by themselves and they don't want immigration bothering them. So, you lost it, you lost that bridge to come together because there's so many gaps in between."

### The Missing Poor

Most of the people who were interviewed for this study live in households with incomes that exceed the poverty line, but not always by much. There are teachers, accountants, and professionals among them, but the majority have spent their working lives as blue-collar operatives, or in hospitals where they wore white but earned a modest salary. Over half of the qualitative sample had household incomes below $25,000, even with multiple earners in the family. They do not think of themselves as impoverished, though they live in low income neighborhoods from which the more affluent have fled. Indeed, their modest earnings do not permit them to run from the problems of poor communities: crime, violence, and drugs surround them.

In their world, as in most middle-class communities, race is the most visible marker of social position. Class, by contrast, is a missing category. That is not because they do not recognize that they live in a poor community, beset with problems that make daily life problematic. It is because if they attribute this fate to any cause, it will almost always be race or ethnicity that trumps class as the force behind their social and geographic location.

Perhaps for this reason, it is striking how questions about social responsibility fail to elicit much commentary on the needs of "the poor." One hears lengthy discussion about the obligations individuals have to their families, to their communities, and to their groups, but not to those who are poor. Part of the explanation for this gap may lie in the commitments some have made to "the church," an institution that

provides services to the poor in New York's barrio neighborhoods. Indeed, more than a third of this sample said that they felt obligated to give to the church, though they complained a good deal about their churches as well.

It may also be that, living so close to the poverty line themselves, the working (or retired) poor tend not to feel as much sympathy toward those less fortunate as do others who are socially distant and looking for a target for their charitable impulses.[8] So much publicity has been given to AFDC and its problems that my informants often equate "the poor" with "welfare mothers," (as do middle-class supporters of time limits and the end of "welfare as we know it.") The working poor see finer gradations of status at the bottom of the social hierarchy and do not confuse themselves with the homeless, the hopeless, or the welfare dependent. Indeed, the welfare dependent come in for a great deal of criticism amongst them (see Newman 1999).

At the same time, our interviews contain consistent references to the "truly needy": young children, the indigent beggar on the corner, young mothers over their heads with family responsibilities, and the like. Hence while the category of "the poor" is little discussed, particular poor people are the objects of sympathy and charity. In this, our respondents mirror the attitudes discussed in Herbert Gans's powerful book, *The War against the Poor* (1995). Gans explains that while sympathy is shown toward specific individuals, the poor are demonized as a social category. Indeed, this negative view of the category of the poor is a powerful source of antipathy toward welfare and other programs that ameliorate poverty. To the extent that social responsibility is politically defined, our sample seems to embrace a fairly mainstream view that distinguishes the deserving poor from the rest.

### The Missing Nation

Equally absent from my informants' understandings of social responsibility is an abstract conception of the nation, the society as a whole, as an entity toward which commitment must be expressed. The absence of citizenship as a moral obligation is partly explained by the immigration status of the Dominican respondents in our study. Puerto Ricans, in turn, draw upon a mixed and wary view of the United States as a place which has incorporated them, but not on their own terms. The Puerto Rican community is the poorest of New York's Latino populations. Factory jobs that absorbed the mass migration of Puerto Ricans in the 1940s have long since disappeared, leaving succeeding gen-

erations of migrants fewer opportunities to earn a living wage. Puerto Ricans and Dominicans face mobility barriers based on language, and many with dark skin experience the same prejudices leveled at the African Americans with whom they are often confused (especially by employers).

Earlier waves of immigrants who entered the country when the economy was on an upswing achieved their economic mobility over time. Waves of Americanization, molded by World War II and consolidated by postwar affluence, generated attachment to "the best country in the world." Rapid suburbanization fostered a break from the ethnic enclaves of the cities and sped the process of cultural assimilation. The nation became an identity and a source of solidarity among American-born descendants of Italian and Irish immigrants. Civic or community-wide conceptions of social responsibility developed only over time, as relative newcomers gradually became privileged members of the middle class.

Few of these conditions held fast by the mid-1970s, as waves of Puerto Rican and Dominican migrants settled into cities like New York. Like the African Americans who preceded them in the Great Migration out of the rural south to the industrial north, the "new" immigrants had to find their way into the urban economy at a time when high paying industrial jobs were rapidly disappearing. The service jobs that replaced unionized, blue-collar jobs were distinguished by low pay and dead-end job ladders.

Upward mobility has become far more problematic for the new generations of immigrants in our time. Under current economic circumstances, identification with the nation has been more tenuous, and abstract ideas of social responsibility are equally strained. Solidarity with "one's own" has greater appeal when barriers to mobility are firm and persistent, precluding the development of subjective and moral commitments to the larger community. Ironically, the greatest attachment to common institutions is probably found among sports enthusiasts, who cross ethnic lines to a greater degree than those engaged in any other form of civic participation.

## CONCLUSION

When we investigate the contours of social responsibility, we are asking powerful questions not only about what people do to "make good" on their conceptions of obligation, but about the boundaries they draw around their identities. How do they situate themselves in a moral sense? What are the forms of community that exert a powerful

enough influence to produce a moral claim on their time, their resources, and their sense of social location? Which of these claims are trivial—satisfied by the writing of a check—and which really command attention and devotion?

Inner-city minorities are often described as socially disengaged isolates who have pulled back from wider social obligations in response to safety problems in the neighborhoods where they live. Yet in this study, we see that the migration experience, urban segregation, and limited economic mobility have all conspired to create a strong sense of belonging. The same forces have bound minority groups into enclaves that breed both solidarity and division. Loyalty is owed to those who are within the boundaries, though the lines are themselves fluid and shifting according to time and circumstance. Neighbors may see themselves as locked together in a struggle for survival or protection against fellow residents who do not share their values. Co-ethnics confronting racial barriers may divide themselves off from fellow residents of their neighborhoods who belong to another racial group or nationality.

The lived reality of these boundaries, however, is created in part by the social responsibilities insiders feel toward one another. Parents who raise their children "right" do so not only out of a sense of family values, but out of the conviction that they owe this effort to others in their community. They fault irresponsible parents not only for what they have done to destroy their children's futures, but for what they have wrought upon the neighborhood in the form of antisocial behavior. Neighbors band together to watch over one another, organizing block watch groups, youth parties, and other forms of support against a social decay that threatens their peace of mind and the safety of their children. Dominicans and Puerto Ricans think about what they should do to foster the well-being of their own people, putting them ahead of the demands of others who may be equally needy, but who must be someone else's responsibility. The ethnic "mosaic" expresses a racially fractured understanding of the community to which they belong. Yet within the boundaries these divisions create, a sense of social responsibility is clearly expressed and acted out in their daily lives.

## REFERENCES

Anderson, E. 1990. *Streetwise*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Brooks-Gunn, J., G. Duncan, P. K. Klebanov, and N. Sealand. 1993. Do neighborhoods influence child and adolescent development? *American Journal of Sociology* 99:353–94.

Coleman, J. 1988. Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology Supplement* 94:S95–S120.

Gans, H. 1995. *The war against the poor: The underclass and antipoverty policy.* New York: Free Press.

Geronimus, A. 1995. The translation of social inequality into reproductive inequality: A population-based test of the weathering hypothesis. *University of Michigan Population Studies Center Research Report* no. 95-323 (January).

Hannerz, U. 1969. *Soulside: Inquiries into ghetto culture and community.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Kasinitz, P. 1992. *Caribbean New York.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Lewin, T. 1998. The disturbing trend: More victims and much less sense in the string of shootings at schools. *New York Times,* 22 May, sec. A.

Mahler, S. 1994. *American dreaming.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Massey, D., and N. Denton. 1990. *American apartheid.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

*New York Times.* 1997. Study links violence rate to cohesion of community. 17 August, sec. A.

Newman, K. 1998. Place and race. In *Welcome to Middle Age!* ed. R. Shweder, 259–93. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1999. *No shame in my game: The working poor in the inner city.* New York: Knopf/Russell Sage.

Putnam, R. D. 1995. Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy* 6:65–78.

———. 1996. The strange disappearance of civic America. *American Prospect* 24 (winter):34–48.

Stack, C. 1974. *All our kin: Strategies for survival in a black community.* New York: Harper and Row.

Venkatesh, S. 1997. An invisible community: Inside Chicago's public housing. *American Prospect* 34 (September–October):35–40.

Wilson, W. J. 1987. *The truly disadvantaged.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

———. 1996. *When work disappears.* New York: Knopf.

## NOTES

1. Our life history interviews took an average of three hours to tape record, since they covered everything from the respondents' migration histories, employment experiences, and perceptions of race relations to their cultural definitions of social obligations.

2. The life history sample is generally representative of the New York survey. There were fewer women in the qualitative study and fewer married couples. Moreover, the life history group is somewhat better educated than the sample as a whole, with a larger proportion of high school graduates. But these variations are modest and none were statistically significant.

3. Elijah Anderson (1990) argues that ghetto communities distinguish between respectable families and deviant ones. Ulf Hannerz (1969) makes the same distinction.

4. The recent rash of mass shootings in rural and suburban schools may force a change in this view. In most of these cases, a troubled child who was known to family members and acquaintances as having expressed threatening intentions acted on those sentiments to devastating result. Retrospective accounts suggest that most of these individuals were known for their aberrant attitudes but either were not taken seriously or were regarded as a private, personal problem for their families to tend to. As the consequences of that privatized approach more frequently become painful for the community as a whole, we may see a more intrusive or communal definition of childrearing responsibilities. In these tragic episodes, middle-class communities take on some of the more unfortunate characteristics of the inner-city neighborhoods from which my interviews emerge: enclaves where the private matters become public concern in a hurry. See Lewin 1998.

5. Elsewhere (Newman 1998) I define success as the absence of failure for poor families in run-down neighborhoods. Pride accrues to those who have managed to see their children to adulthood without teen pregnancy, involvement in the illegal trades, or major problems with the law.

6. Middle-class white families who experience downward mobility often confront the discord that attends this conception of generational autonomy. Parents who have fallen on hard times or adult children who have lost their jobs and find that they need to borrow money feel intensely uncomfortable about this dependency. It violates a cultural code which separates love from money, demanding a continuous expression of the former and only the most time-limited offering of the latter. Parents are responsible for supporting children—with funds flowing in this direction only—until they reach maturity. Economic dependency thereafter is a source of shame.

7. Alice Rossi, personal communication, 25 March 1998.

8. Fifty-two percent of the qualitative sample were working. Only 8.2% were unemployed. Across all three ethnic groups, approximately 18% reported AFDC receipt in their households.