

2013

More Than Just a Meal: the Economic Utility of Social Capital in the Lives of the Poor

Benjamin Higby Strange

The College of Wooster, benjamin.higby.strange@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy>



Part of the [American Politics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Strange, Benjamin Higby, "More Than Just a Meal: the Economic Utility of Social Capital in the Lives of the Poor" (2013). *Senior Independent Study Theses*. Paper 537.

<https://openworks.wooster.edu/independentstudy/537>

This Senior Independent Study Thesis Exemplar is brought to you by Open Works, a service of The College of Wooster Libraries. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Independent Study Theses by an authorized administrator of Open Works. For more information, please contact openworks@wooster.edu.

MORE THAN JUST A MEAL:
THE ECONOMIC UTILITY OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE LIVES OF THE POOR

By Benjamin Higby Strange

An Independent Study Thesis
submitted to the Department of Political Science
at The College of Wooster
on Friday, 15 March 2013
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of I.S. Thesis

Advisor: Professor Angela Bos

Second Reader: Professor Eric Moskowitz

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	3
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	4
<i>An Introduction</i>	6
Chapter One: A Review of the Literature and Theory	10
Chapter Two: Methods	32
Chapter Three: Building Social Capital & Results From Participant Observation	41
Chapter Four: Spending Social Capital	59
Chapter Five: No Capital to Spend	71
Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion	79
References	88

Abstract

There is general consensus in the literature that social capital is important for the poor. However, these studies tend to be handicapped by a badly posed methodology: researchers have compared communities with high social capital to those with low social capital and noted differences in economic security and ability to organize against exploitive conditions among them. This process does little to examine the instrumental value of social capital for the poor individual and neglects causality; are communities more economically secure because of social capital, or are those communities that are economically secure more likely to be social? When considering day-to-day poverty attenuation, this question is important for policy: neo-liberal market theorists contend that a cash stipend has more utility for the poor than a meal, putting aside that a meal provides opportunity to build social capital. By conducting participant observation at a meal program, the researcher discovered that the poor benefited economically from building and spending social capital by developing informal credit markets, increasing market knowledge, increasing knowledge of area services and developing psychologically comforting safety nets. This instrumental value provides some evidence that meal programs have utility extending beyond the food provided and that social capital affects economic security for individuals.

Acknowledgements

This project began as a set of loose platitudes, a little frustration and a firm belief that we can do better for the poor in America. If it now resembles rational and productive discourse, I have many people to thank. My advisor, Professor Angela Bos, provided invaluable help in convincing me early on to clarify and develop my thoughts. Between reminding me to define obscure terms and simply informing me when no one could possibly understand what I had written, Professor Bos helped turn my scatterbrained, diary-prone expression into communicative dialogue. I am sure that without her guidance I would have failed to convey practically anything of value.

I am also indebted to Professor Eric Moskowitz. His initial suggestion of reading the literature of social capital theory was perhaps the biggest impetus for my research. After I has spewed a number of buzzwords, among them ‘networking,’ in brief defense of my theory, Professor Moskowitz was kind enough to inform me that social capital theory sort of spoke to much of what I was failing to convey.

Many friends provided important critiques or improvements to my theory and analysis. Among the most crucial were Kyle Smucker, David Mallinson and Gus Fugguit. Kyle was especially important for reminding me that we should and can do more for the poor than what I have prescribed here. His actual experience helping the poor in Washington D.C. seek employment grants him sight far beyond the vantage of my desk, and I respect him immensely. David is a superb economist, and his opinion on my appropriation of economic discourse was useful.

Gus was particularly helpful in putting a name to my method: participant observation. As a sociologist, he was able to identify the actual social science term for what

I had been describing as “you know, hanging out and listening.” I hope many more political scientists find friends like Gus.

Many others were patient enough to listen, and if not comment, at least nod appreciatively. Among them were Carolyn Hockey, Micah Motenko, Derick Evans, Quentin Fisher, Jordan Broutman, Elise Hudock, Emily Howard, Allie Miraldi, Professor Thomas Tierney, Emily Timmerman, Benjamin Turner, Professor Philip Mellizo, Abigail Rider, Madeleine O'Neill, Libba Smith, Molly Porter, Cara Haxo, Kendra Dempewolf and Maia Binhammer.

Finally I would like to thank Marty Strange, Annette Higby, Andy Tveekrem, Craig Finn, Van Morrison, Matt Nadeau, Marissa Paternoster, Dillon Bly and Bob Dylan for their constant inspiration. I would have accomplished very little were it not for them, particularly Marty and Annette. Those guys are great.

Were it not for the presence of the unwashed and the half-educated, the formless, queer and incomplete, the unreasonable and absurd, the infinite shapes of the delightful human tadpole, the horizon would not wear so wide a grin.

Frank Moore Colby

An Introduction

When asked to give a gross simplification of this study, I usually say that I am trying to explain the importance of friendship in the lives of the poor, but in terms that an economist can understand. After that I seldom need launch into an explanation of ‘social capital,’ or ‘market frictions,’ as most seem to understand the intuition behind my theory, and why economists might demand a more involved discussion. So, this study is probably not for those many who have asked, but instead for those economists who ask for further explanation. The following chapters provide copious evidence that the ability and opportunity of the poor to build and spend social capital directly affects the way they experience poverty—materially and psychologically. The implications of this relationship are numerous for both policy and our understanding of markets, but in my discussion I have opted for relative parsimony. I am primarily interested in critiquing the argument, proposed by a number of market theorists, that cash should be the *only* subsidy we give to the poor. Their argument flows that while a meal is just a meal, cash may be spent on whatever the individual desires—that cash has more ‘utility’. So, perhaps a better simplification of my argument goes ‘a meal is never *just* a meal.’

The first chapter, a review of the literature and an introduction to my own theory, serves around three purposes. First, the review aims to highlight the link between non-profit organizations in the social services and government, a relationship that connotes that social capital is a matter of policy as much as it is of sociology. If the reader can accept this, then the following discussion of welfare reform and funding to social services points to two prevalent, though wrongheaded, attitudes towards anti-poverty policy. First, that government should ‘get out of the way,’ of private non-profit organizations, though government is in fact the financial crutch of such groups and in many ways shapes the non-profit sector. Second, that policy should try to either enhance the opportunity or encourage the effort of the poor, which, in either case I believe is tantamount to market coercion. At the very least I am uninterested in policies that tie economic productivity to basic physical wellbeing (i.e. physical shelter and food). For this, I am unapologetic.

Second, I examine the literature surrounding direct subsidy to the poor. I am not the only theorist to argue that we should care for the poor without condition. Indeed, in subsidizing the poor without condition I find a surprising ally; neo-liberal market theorists posit that we should give cash subsidy to the poor by way of a negative income tax. I should note that we come from radically different perspectives on why this is best, and the reasoning as outlined by Milton Friedman will better explain neo-liberal thought on the matter in the first chapter. Among their arguments, neo-liberals claim that the utility of monetary capital is greater than any other kind of subsidy, and this, however, is where we disagree.

Finally, I explain that this study is not concerned with measuring the social capital and poverty attenuation of communities as a whole. There have been many studies posed

to do this, and they provide a shallow understanding of the value of social capital to individuals and therefore a bad critique of the superior utility of cash. So, instead, I explain that I am measuring the levels of social capital and poverty attenuation of individuals who attend the breakfast program at Trinity UCC and trying to develop a causal relationship therein through qualitative methods. The review concludes that I suspect those who build social capital by means of a subsidy program, something that could not be done with only a check, will experience poverty attenuation extending beyond those who do not.

The following chapter is generally procedural; participant observation is discussed as a methodology for testing my theory, and there is some discussion of what biases its use may have caused. In general, I still defend its use and think it was the best way to collect evidence. Though, I also note that much of my observation was supplemented with formal interviews. Chapter two concludes with a short introduction to the physical plant at Trinity.

Chapters three through five present my bare findings and some initial analysis. They are probably the most intriguing portions of this study, particularly if you care little about market theory or even policy. Chapter three introduces our cast, and outlines their dispositions, defects and distinctions before turning towards their routines of social interaction. Chapters four and five elaborate on specific individuals' abilities, or inabilities, to rely on friendships to alleviate their poverty. The strengths of my methodology may be clearest in that the presentation of its data is pertinent to many disciplines. For, throughout chapters three, four and five surely the psychologist, anthropologist, economist, sociologist and philosopher each have cause to think that a lowly political scientist has encroached upon their intellectual turf.

However, chapter six, in its concluding discussion, returns to a question of policy; if we are to directly subsidize the poor in policy, what are the principle considerations for what kind of benefit to give? Admittedly, market theorists are on to something: cash is important. I even concede, comfortably, that cash has more utility than food alone. This was at least as apparent throughout observation as was the primary thesis of this study. However, chapter six builds on the findings in previous chapters to allow that primary thesis its say: social capital built at Trinity's program provides a crucial difference between the lives of those who have it and those who do not, and fostering the opportunity to grow such capital should to be a goal of anti-poverty policy.

I returned to the Holiday Inn — where they have a swimming pool and air-conditioned rooms — to consider the paradox of a nation that has given so much to those who preach the glories of rugged individualism from the security of countless corporate sinecures, and so little to that diminishing band of yesterday's refugees who still practice it, day by day, in a tough, rootless and sometimes witless style that most of us have long since been weaned away from.

Hunter S. Thompson,
Gonzo Papers, Vol. 1

1. Literature Review and Theory

Sociologist Alejandro Portes once noted that when scientists invoke ‘social capital’ they mean one of two things, and typically fail to mention which: the strength of bonds, trust and civic participation in a *community* (that is, social capital held by the community) or the ability of *individuals* to cash in, so to speak, on friendships (social capital held by individuals) (Portes, 2000). In order to discuss how best to attenuate poverty through public policy, this study is principally concerned with the second definition. While highlighting the decline of social capital among poor *communities* has attained vogue in the American social sciences, partially due to the work of Robert Putnam, our understanding of social capital’s instrumental value for poor *individuals* remains comparatively shallow in the empirical literature.

Instead of looking at how social capital may actually help attenuate the poverty of individuals, research has often paired empirical measurements of a community’s social

capital in decline with worsening economic conditions (Anglin 2002, Mencken 1997, Billings and Blee 1948), or with narratives of poor communities' increasingly limited ability to fight the power of industry (Bell 2009, Billings and Blee 1948). Such comparisons are intriguing, and undoubtedly they are part of the story. Unfortunately they do little to examine the interactions in which the poor might spend their 'social capital,' or the mechanisms by which the poor do so. If we want to understand *why* those communities with low social capital have the least secure poor individuals, we need to discover what about having, or not having, social capital affects insecurity. And while anthropologists and sociologists have expertly highlighted cases in which it appears that a dearth of social capital coincided with high levels of abject poverty, how transactions of an individual's social capital supposedly function require further examination, particularly for the sake of policy. In short: should we encourage poor individuals to build social capital, and if so how do we do it?

Especially this first question, should we encourage the poor to build social capital, is important when faced with the rhetoric of market theorists who focus on the superior *utility* of a cash benefit (proposed in part by Friedman 1980, and summarized by Currie and Ghavaria 2008, Moffit 1989). The argument is fairly straightforward: an in-kind benefit (in this case, food, housing, clothing or other non-cash goods) will have *lower* utility than a cash subsidy of equal value. Or, more simply, giving a meal to the poor provides less utility than giving them a cash stipend for the value of that meal. Many who espouse this belief go one step further and claim that giving a meal is simply an affect of paternalism, or our desire to regulate the poor's habits and consumption (Currie and Gahvari 2008). This would imply that the Trinity breakfast program, where I observed,

would have done more good for the poor if rather than giving a meal, gave out cash of the same value. Identifying the specific ways in which building and spending social capital helps the poor would provide a trenchant critique of this theory. I contend, and plan to demonstrate throughout this study, that a meal program, particularly to the residents of a rural community in Ohio, offers utility extending far beyond breakfast.

However, we should note that this study tests policy in a very specific way. If the argument delivered in this study towards how best to evaluate the success of Trinity seems antithetical to its audience, I will not be terribly surprised. First, I am only interested in testing the ability of Trinity to *attenuate* poverty, not fix poverty (or, more bitterly, fix the poor). That is to say my discussion of why Trinity succeeds divorces ‘anti-poverty’ policy from ‘pro-growth’ policy, an unfortunate pairing perpetuated by those who would grant the poor some opportunity, or incentive, to pull themselves into the comfort class. Both insist that in order to help, the poor must participate in the market. While this often has earnest and kind roots, it is distinct from attenuating poverty. Helping along the tide may raise all boats, but I am far more concerned with fixing the immediate holes for those who are sinking.

Another important qualification must be made. While the primary concern of this study is to demonstrate that the use of social capital provides an important critique of exclusive reliance on cash benefit, there are other good critiques in the literature that I would like to raise. A number of theorists covered in the review believe, and I agree, that there is something pernicious about impersonal benefit—that is, dependence on bureaucratic structures—beyond its ignorance of social capital. At its best, impersonal benefit is stigmatizing and isolating. At its worst, cash benefit from a government

bureaucracy opens the door for explicit market coercion, or the government explicitly controlling the market behavior of individuals. Still, the review is mostly posed to note that impersonal benefits may enhance social exclusion, or block the growth of social capital. It should instead be a goal of policy not only to avoid heightening social exclusion, but also to encourage the poor to build social capital.

Non-profit Organizations and Government Funding

The skeptical reader may believe that I gave myself away in the last section, citing that I linked bureaucratic structures and social exclusion. For, if policy, which tends to be bureaucratic by nature, discourages the growth of social capital, why is the government getting involved? Is perhaps government involvement the problem? This reader may even go on further to say that only through social, sacred or otherwise non-governmental institutions can communities help individuals build social capital. And I agree. Building social capital may find no home more natural than in non-profit organizations, churches, clubs, etc. that encourage social gathering.

However, these institutions, particularly in the social services, have an inseparable relationship with government funds and government policy—and suggesting that government does nothing to shape their effectiveness, goals or methods is ahistorical to the point of lunacy. First, those non-profits that might attract the poor to engage socially, that is those in the business of allocating social services, have the most concrete relationship with government money. The partnership of non-profit organizations in the social services and government funds is old in America; in 1890, a majority of funds granted in New York City intended to help the poor were allocated directly to non-profit organizations (Warner 1984, 404). Perhaps of greater socio-political importance,

historians point out that at this time non-profit organizations were considered a public good: neither at odds with the government nor considered “privatized,” as in the modern economic sense (Stevens, 1982).

This relationship has remained strong, and generally critical to the continued existence of non-profit organizations, as much as the continued provision of government services. In 1990 Michael Lipsky and Steven Rathgeb Smith went so far as to say that the two, non-profit organizations in the social services and government, were in a state of ‘mutual dependence’ (626). However, a conservative line surrounding these programs claims that private charity should take the place of government for their continued existence (Lipsky et al. 1990, Salamon 1986, Stevens 1982). The notion that private charity would, or even could, do this is simply absurd. Based on one scholarly estimate from 1997, non-profit organizations would need to increase their private contributions by seven times to absorb changes in government welfare policy that limited how long the poor could collect welfare (Blank, qtd. Edin 1998, 542).

Even in the era of retrenchment, when social services faced deep cuts under the Reagan Administration, government, *not* private charity, provided the majority of funds to non-profit organizations in the social services, while private charity offset no more than a quarter of government cutbacks (Salamon 1986, 6-15). Further, in this same era just over half of government funds spent on social services in total were granted out to non-profit organizations (Salamon 1986, 6). The systems are fully intertwined by necessity, not by accident. And so when the Reagan administration graciously suggested that the government get out of the way of private organizations, organizations more effective, they committed an essential performative contradiction: calling for reliance on

the 'private' sector while cutting substantially its public revenue stream.

1996 Reform's Effect on Non-Profit Organizations

This was not all to say that non-profit organizations in the social services are without distinction from government programs. They are different, and their difference is critical to building social capital for the poor. It may just well be that distinguishing between government *run* and government *funded* sufficiently takes government '*out of the way*.'¹ However, it would be a mistake to assume that funding is the only way that government interacts with non-profit organizations. Policy also shapes what non-profit organizations do and how they operate. Recent shifts in policy have affected in particular what services these organizations focus on in order to help the poor.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 saw unprecedented changes in welfare policy. Political scientists have focused primarily on the end of entitlement through time limits and the move to allocating block grants to the states; both have implications for the job non-profit organizations face. Most obviously, the end of entitlement from the federal government has placed enormous weight on the shoulders of non-profit organizations that deal with the immediate needs of the poor and made their role all the more critical to poverty attenuation (Edin and Lein 1998); when time limits run out, and the poor can no longer depend on the government, they must turn to non-profit organizations for help.

As for block grants, states were given unprecedented discretion on how to spend this money, ostensibly awarding some to non-profit social services (Chaves 1999, 836).

¹ I would note, though, that this is not what most who advocate for reliance on NGOs espouse. It can be so that non-profit organizations do much better than government programs, though they require government funds.

This of course is important for the discussion of general funding posed earlier, but it also carries implications for what kind of organizations, and therefore services, exist. To put simply, non-profit organizations must compete for this money, and governments decide which organizations win. A third piece of the PRWORA, Charitable Choice, requires that states that contract with non-profit organizations allow religious institutions to compete on equal grounds. The religious dimension of charitable choice, of course, intriguing, but generally unimportant to this point; policy shaped the grounds on which non-profits can compete for funds and succeed in attenuating poverty. This greatly diminishes the rhetoric of ‘privatization’ in even the least government-tied of programs, but more importantly reminds us that policy matters in shaping how the non-profit sector operates.

If we are to focus on building social capital by means of non-profit organizations, we have to acknowledge that policy matters. Which non-profit services receive money is a choice governments make as are what government programs also exist. Both affect what services are offered in the non-profit sector. Theorizing about the superiority of non-profit services, as this study surely does, demands that we acknowledge that government choices shape the non-profit landscape in terms of what non-profits try to, which ones get to do it, and how successful they are. In short, non-profit organizations are responsive and reflect government action, and as such bolstering their success is a question of policy.

Theories on Poverty and Their Implications for Policy

And so, putting aside the notion of *who provides* we now move to *what is provided*. Invariably this is reduced to some sort of debate on the cause of poverty. I disagree that this should be a principal concern, particularly since as stated earlier I am not interested in fixing but attenuating poverty. Further, ‘*why*’ is not the only consideration

that finds its way into anti-poverty policy. If it were, it would be such that modern American conservatives, neo-liberal economist and I agreed on what should be done through policy. This is not the case. Other values, such as what markets should look like; notions of what the actual problems of poverty are; what right the government has to shape behavior; and what responsibility the government has to cushion economic insecurity shape attitudes on anti-poverty policy.

As such, while strict neo-liberals and modern American conservatives alike believe that willingness to participate in the labor market and other economic choices lead the poor to poverty, they come to radically different proposals on what is the best way to intervene. I, too, at some level believe that the poor's unwillingness to participate in the market is a causal element of poverty. American liberals will cite something similar, but frame it in terms of ability. That is, the poor are poor because they lack the opportunity to participate in the market, perhaps especially due to modern deindustrialization (Gans, 1995).

Five Causal Elements of Poverty and Supposed Policy Camps Therein

So, for as much emphasis on '*why*' the poor are poor is given, it may be a bad predictor of policy prescription. As mentioned above, the primary debate in popular American discourse tends to ask if the poor do not work due to a lack of effort or opportunity. To illuminate the fuller breadth of this discussion, I will provide a number of theories on the causes of poverty in extreme brevity. Rebecca Blank presents five general causal theories of poverty; her wrong account is as good as any to begin to illustrate the ineffectiveness of arguing over the causal dimensions of poverty.

The first perspective may be less applicable to discussions of American poverty for

it contends that poverty is created by underdeveloped markets which exclude the poor from an opportunity to develop a comparative advantage, or a division of labor (Blank 2003, 449) and that in order to solve this, these markets need to be developed by external investment (Blank 2003, 450). Blank's second camp of causal thought relies on the idea that even in developed economies there are those members that are unable to sell their labor for whatever personal deficiency, be it age, body-ability or general skill (Blank 2003, 450-51). Here she notes that in many cases those who hold to this camp would favor programs that help the poor better compete in markets (Blank 2003, 451). This camp favors what I have referenced as 'opportunity' causes.

Her third camp presents the assumption that marketized economies will produce poverty by their nature (Blank 2003, 451). That is, to operate a market of any development and size, a certain percentage of people will remain poor. Taken charitably, this is a case for efficiency and stability in the market; taken reproachfully, this is Marxian analysis that capitalist markets need a reserve of the unemployed and poor to ease the exploitation of the general labor force (Blank 2003, 452). Blank suggests that those who wish to fight poverty and hold these beliefs tend to support policies that limit free markets through government intervention, such as minimum wage laws and workers rights policies (Blank 2003, 452).

The fourth camp is a general critique of the impersonal market; forces outside of the economy, such as political and social forces, have more to do with poverty than the function of economies taken in a theoretical vacuum (Blank 2003, 453). This is an old and good critique of those who believe that markets rely exclusively on impersonal exchanges, as do many economic theorists, specifically neo-liberals. Blank suggests that

those who hold this to be true would favor, much like the third camp, better regulations to limit the free market (Blank 2003, 454).

The fifth and final camp should be familiar to debates of domestic policy: “[p]overty is the result of behavioral characteristics and choices,” (Blank 2003, 454). This is in many ways similar to the second camp in that poverty boils down to willingness or effort to participate in markets. Policy prescriptions, as one may expect, are less charitable for those who endorse effort over opportunity. Blank notes that those who believe effort determines economic advantage hold “the assumption that alternative lifestyles were available to be chosen that would have provided greater economic opportunity,” (Blank 2003, 454). Choices blamed include substance abuse, while behavioral characteristics include perceptions of laziness and unreliability (Blank 2003, 455). There is of course considerable overlap in perceptions of what policy ought do between this camp and the second. Blank posits that those who hold effort as the determinant are perhaps more likely to favor counseling or other kinds of supportive programs to programs that generally alleviate poverty (Blank 2003, 456). This is misleading on a number of accounts on Blank’s part; while many of the public may support this line of reasoning, many neo-liberal economists both blame the poor’s effort and suggest alleviating poverty by direct cash subsidy.

Blank, being an unfortunately dutiful economist, has only examined those policies that assume that market participation is the only means by which we can help the poor, wholly ignoring that in many cases this represents coercion, or the shaping of behavior in unsavory ways. But further she ignores that many theories she presents, particularly the third camp, are relatively disenchanted with the market’s ability to solve anything. Rather

than fixating on how we can shift markets or shift people to fix poverty, I contend that at some level we must break the bonds that link economic productivity to economic security. To be sure, I agree with Blank that given the liberalized market we have, these are the best explanations for why poverty exists. In fact, each probably contains its own portion of the truth. But I am ever less convinced that working with the market is the best way to attenuate poverty. Rather than trying to shift forces, or people, I contend that we should directly subsidize the poor. Luckily, I have a number of, perhaps unlikely, allies in this.

Rejecting Forced Market Participation

This section is intended to argue, through a number of competing intellectual frameworks, that policy should focus on directly subsidizing the poor, not directing their market behavior. A number of theorists, particularly those who agree on little else, argue that trying to help poverty by way of coercing market behavior is wrongheaded, and I agree. A capitalist sentiment as much as it is humanist: economic exchanges should, to the best of society's ability, remain voluntary and governments should not try to control most kinds of market or personal behavior. At some level this is absurd; markets and governments are irrevocably linked. Public roads, water, police protection, legal recourse and tax policy ensure this. However, the extent to which government is responsible for helping to shape the market links government responsibility and those who do poorly in the market. However, many others come to the conclusion that we should directly subsidize the poor. And while I disagree with other aspects of their theory, I am content to present their arguments as well.

Neo-Liberal Critiques of Forced Market Participation

Milton Friedman, the late public intellectual and professor at the Chicago School of Economics, held that effort is the principle determinate of economic success. Recall that Blank predicted that those who believe this would favor counseling, or other kinds of services, over a direct subsidy. She is flatly wrong, as Friedman advocated for a negative income tax (a kind of direct cash subsidy) to replace all government anti-poverty efforts. To understand this, we will walk through the assumptions that underlie Friedman's beliefs on economy and society as outlined in *Free to Choose*. The first is the basis of most modern economic thought: Friedman believes that markets allow rational actors to engage in voluntary exchange, particularly in an exchange in which both parties feel they have come ahead (Friedman 1980, 13). In turn, most policies that govern economic exchanges outside of the free market are coercive.

Second, Friedman believes that economic incentives are the primary, and especially best, tool to drive efficient markets and create beneficial societies; the absence of economic incentive would, in turn, hurt society (Friedman 1980, 23). Third, markets are blind to social constructs, or impersonal. This postulate follows from his belief that economic incentives are chiefly what drive economic activity, and as such "when you buy your pencil or your daily bread, you don't know whether your pencil was made or the wheat was grown by a white man or a black man, by a Chinese or an Indian. As a result, the price system enables people to cooperate peacefully in one phase of their life while each one goes about his own business in respect of everything else." (Friedman 1980, 12-13)

This line of thinking, however, does not lead Friedman to argue against all

alleviation of poverty. Instead, he argues that if anything must be done, to let it be some sort of negative income tax to replace all social safety nets. The specifics of this tax are not complicated, and for the purposes of this review accept that poor families would receive a bonus for any earned income calculated by subtracting earned income from a beneficiary level, and halving the result. The beneficiary level has been debated, but Friedman advocated a beneficiary level of \$10,000 in 1980, which will serve as good example. At that level, a family that earned no income would receive \$5,000, where as a family already earning \$4,000 would receive an additional \$2,000 (helping to mitigate economic disincentive to work). (Friedman 1980, 122)

This, Friedman believed, would provide enough for the poor while doing the least harm to the market by distorting the price system (Friedman 1980, 122). Rather than the government deciding what to give the poor, giving the poor choice in the market by means of cash would preserve the efficiency of markets to meet actual demand. Further, Friedman makes two important, though perhaps wrong, claims: first, it is a good thing that the negative income tax shifts from focusing on the ailments of poverty, i.e. hunger, homelessness, sickness and the like, and moves towards exclusively subsidizing income (1980, 122). Later in this review I have provided evidence that poverty, even fiscally, is far more than this, such as limited savings and limited access to credit markets. Second, Friedman notes that such a program would remove the stigma of assistance and remove the control over the lives of the poor that bureaucrats exert (1980, 123). I am touched that Friedman too worries that bureaucrats have too much control over the lives of the poor (a reality discussed in the following section), but the notion that an impersonal benefit such as the negative income tax could reduce the stigma of poverty simply falls flat.

Friedman's prescriptions for impersonal benefit are tempting to many. For those who wish to help the poor under any circumstances, it rejects 'effort' determined benefit and upholds entitlement. Further, for those who believe that cash benefits provide greater utility in the economic sense, surely a program like this outweighs in-kind benefits. However, this line of thinking wholly ignores that personal, in-kind benefit may serve the poor in ways extending beyond what is explicitly given, and that removing all safety nets with the exception of the negative income tax (as Friedman proposes), would diminish the possibility to receive that kind of hidden utility. Though, I should not get ahead of myself.

Entitlement over Market Participation in the Empirical Literature

Towards the point on coercive bureaucrats, let us examine some of the empirical literature focused on anti-poverty programs that encourage market participation. Work-first policies enacted by states under PRWORA provide an excellent example. Policies that encourage case managers to promote work over post-secondary education for single mothers often do so with the continued support of TANF money on the line. A. Fiona Pearson writes that most caseworkers are not able to accept that mothers have some desire for self-sufficiency that a post-secondary degree might provide, but see work as an obvious answer to meeting the needs of her family (Pearson 2007, 734).

Many case managers, of course, understand the importance of a post-secondary education, but find that bureaucratic barriers, particularly time limits for TANF funds without work and overburdened caseloads, force them to encourage work for their clients (Pearson 2007, 743). Further, case managers themselves are evaluated based on increasing workforce participation rates, and as a result "may find themselves steering students toward jobs, often low-wage jobs in the service sector, instead of toward a college degree,"

in order to reflect better on the case manager's office (Pearson 2007, 743). The implications Pearson alludes to are problematic in that encouraging a college education is a pro-growth, effort-based solution by a different name. Still, whether the policy was coined as work opportunity, as case managers surely see themselves fulfilling, or holding the poor accountable for effort to receive TANF funds, there is a clear portrait of shaping behavior by holding rent checks and grocery bills hostage.

Entitled to What, Exactly?

Moving towards policy that rejects market participation, we now enter a number of debates about how direct attenuation of poverty should be delivered. First, theorists have argued over whether or not benefits should be granted in cash or in-kind (that is, in items that programs determine the poor need, such as food, shelter, clothing, etc.). Janet Currie and Firouz Gahvari present extensive empirical analysis on the international preference of benefits in an attempt to learn why policy more often is shaped to grant benefits in-kind.

A majority of the paper is devoted to the authors' perplexion (one not uncommon to economists) as to why so many programs deal in in-kind transfers rather than exclusively cash benefits, when given a Benthamian-economic analysis cash benefit would provide greater utility for the recipient (Currie and Gahvari 2008, 333). The economists note that given the overall preference of in-kind transfers found cross cultures, there may be some sort of hidden utility and superior efficiency and equity in in-kind transfers, one that calls upon the community to request "a better understanding of the underlying rational for in-kind transfers, and of the way that they work in practice," in order to further develop how policy should be formed (Currie and Gahvari 2008, 378). The authors

do unfortunately little to explain what about in-kind benefits may provide hidden utility. Though, this study hopes to in part explain that secret strength: whereas cash benefits are by their nature impersonal, in-kind benefits often take the form of a socially distributed service, such as the Trinity breakfast program. Thus, one benefit provides opportunity to build social capital whereas one does not.

The second of these debates, personal rather than impersonal benefits, is more difficult to operationalize. Certainly a welfare check is an impersonal benefit—but what of a non-profit organization that operates on a very bureaucratic, faceless benefit scheme? At the very least, there is a feasible continuum between direct government benefits and socially oriented non-profit organizations; government redistribution programs are more strictly a one-size fits all model, non-profit organizations by their nature can be more hands on and individualized (Edin 1998 543). Many point out that each side of the non-profit coin can be problematic. When operating towards the less bureaucratic, organizations suffer from amateurism (Salamon 1995) whereas those who are more formalized benefits suffer the pitfalls of the very government programs with which they are contrasted (Perrow 1974). At the very least I would present that these organizations carry with them the basic choice at which side to tend towards. Further, the nature of a one-size-fits-all benefit, as provided by a non-profit organization, is more likely to be determined through an experience based process when compared to a government benefit scheme. The later is responsive mostly to enigmatic channels of public policy making, whereas the non-profit organizations are responsive to the work they see done day to day.

Edin calls for non-profits to do more with the social safety net and to address the immediate needs of the poor, particularly given their ability to provide personal support

(Edin 1998, 569). After noting that no non-profit organization in her study sought to meet every need of the poor within a community, she also calls for basic investigation into how non-profit organizations in the social services might benefit from working to collaborate with each other to meet more of the needs of the poor. She warns, however, this could put too great a strain on the administration of such non-profit organizations (Edin 1998, 568). This presents the unfortunate assumption that the networking and cross-organizational flow must come from the top down.

Edin has forgotten that many non-profit organizations can be instrumental in building social capital, and the implications of this are enormous. At Trinity, the abilities of poor recipients to find out about other good services are *not* bound by how able the program directors are able to coordinate among program directors. That is the nature of breaking bread with people you share common issues with. You talk about your lives; you enhance knowledge of what else is available. In fact, it is possible that programs that share an incredible number of recipients have program directors who do not even know each other by name.² But this is just one theoretical vantage of social capital that Edin neglects; indeed, it seems that Edin, Currie and Gahvari are each posed to critique the supreme utility of cash benefits but conclude a thought too early.

Social Capital in Anti-Poverty Programs

In “More Than Bread: Ethnography of a Soup Kitchen” Glasser provides evidence that soup kitchens offer more than just food, but necessary sociability. She does a wonderful job of highlighting the benefits to basic happiness experienced by those who

² As is the case with Trinity; after following one recipient to another a meal program, where nearly all of the recipients looked familiar, I was shocked to find that the director in charge did not know the Reverend at Trinity. He even needed to search his memory to recall that Wooster had a free breakfast program. I doubt that any recipient there needed reminding.

devote themselves to social interaction at soup kitchens, but here I would like to turn her theory and methods towards a question of economics. To remind the reader, this study is principally concerned with how social capital held by the individual contributes to that individual's poverty attenuation. As such, I am looking to analyze specific economic interactions. To do this, we must align in theory specific channels through which agents spending social capital attenuate their poverty, three of which I will propose at the end of this chapter. But first I should pause to recall that this is *not* a typical approach to understanding the relationship between social capital and poverty.

Most scientists, as discussed in the opening of this chapter, have not focused on *individuals'* ability to build and spend social capital, but examined *communities* with or without sufficient levels of social capital and how their poor fare. It does appear that economic prosperity and social capital held by communities have a direct relationship. This may be especially true when tailored specifically to the economic prosperity of lower-income individuals. However, some theorists seem unfortunately preoccupied with social capital's ability to transform society.

Anglin, in her 2002 study, points out that those communities in Appalachia in which social participation was strong, working men and women were more successful in mobilizing against exploitive economic conditions. She emphasizes that those communities that were best able to do this often formed a number of local non-profit organizations and labor movements and "collectives defined by their informality and rooted in local social networks" in pursuit of their goals (Anglin 2002, 576). Bell notes that the success of some industries, particularly coal companies in Appalachia, may in fact diminish social capital in communities. Those coal companies that diminished social

capital, especially by breaking up unions, shifted the emphasis of survival among the working poor from ‘we’ to ‘I’ and ensured the lessened ability of communities to fight for their own survival, particularly in the ways proposed by Anglin (Bell 2009, 655)

If we wish to expose one rather narrow explanation for why communities with social capital fare better economically than those without, this is all well and good. When people can no longer afford to think of their neighbor, it stands to reason that they are less likely to rise up *with* their neighbor in pursuit of grassroots mobilization. But instead let us consider that social capital may have benefits for the poor *far* beyond encouraging their participation in some perhaps haughtily contrived understanding of self-determination. It should discomfort any friend of the poor that theorists sit and discuss how best to encourage the impoverished to take control of their own supposedly flaccid lives, and these benevolent attempts from Anglin and Bell are no different.

A far better assessment of how communities with social capital differ economically from those without comes from a large quantitative study conducted by Andrew M. Isserman, Edward Feser and Drake E. Warren. The study compared which of America’s rural counties had high levels of civic engagement (their way of operationalizing social capital) to which counties were economically prosperous (in terms of unemployment, poverty levels, education levels and housing), and found that “prosperous counties have more social capital on several...measures,” (Isserman et al. 2009, 317). In short, those communities in which there are bowling centers; food service and drinking places; golf courses; organizations dedicated to religion, civic engagement or grant making; small manufacturing establishments; family farms; and general preference for civically minded religion, there is less likely to be economic insecurity (Isserman et al. 2009, 318).

This description I have given should trigger every skeptical reader to question causality, for it is no *surprise* that counties with fewer poor people tend to also have more country clubs. For everything Isserman and his colleagues have put forth towards the importance of social capital, they have essentially compiled all that can be done with this kind of quantitative data, and all that can be done with looking into social capital at the community level. If we want to understand the web of causality pertinent to economic insecurity and social capital, we must turn to understanding how individuals *use* social capital. What about that civically minded religious organizations does well for the poor? If it is true that those who live in social wealth, though economic poverty, are more secure for it, noting a statistical trend does little to explain how the presence of the former causes the security. In order to explain this causality, we must move to the level of the individual, and we must attempt to understand their relationship with social capital qualitatively. Moving to this description, we may uncover both why those communities are more economically secure *and* provide evidence for why a cash stipend does not necessarily provide more utility to the poor than a social meal.

Expending Social Capital: Three Specific Mechanisms

While soup kitchens and the like provide theoretically less utility for the poor than a cash benefit, the institution itself provides an opportunity to build social capital for the poor, a non-explicit benefit of the program. Here I identify three specific ways or mechanisms through which the poor may expend this social capital: by developing information of other area programs, receiving help navigating basic market frictions (that is, any block to an desired, voluntary economic exchange) and building stronger and larger private safety nets. The first mechanism, knowledge of area services, may be

successfully demonstrated through programs that offer help with homeownership or renting assistance to the poor. While these programs are abundant, simply knowing they exist and knowing the proper channels to navigate are major impediments to the poor (Brisson 652). Limited knowledge of the housing program is alleviated in the initial social program simply by allowing those who frequently face the same problem, housing security in this case, to network.

Market frictions are divided into two important categories: first, ability to expend social capital is an important determinate of securing loans from friends. It is well established that one of the most crippling effects of poverty is exclusion from credit markets (Rose et al. 2009, Claessens 2006), particularly given that while an assistant check can sustain to some extent whatever present arrangements of its recipient, this does little to acknowledge that the poor typically have limited, if any, savings to fall back on for one time or emergency expenditures. Recent reviews of poverty in America have argued that wealth, as much as income, provides an important definition of poverty (Headey 2008), and social capital's ability to simulate wealth, by way of creating credit among friends, should be tested as a means of poverty attenuation.

The second market friction alleviated by social capital is much more straightforward: people interested in certain kinds of economic exchanges will discuss what are the best available options. Economists may be comfortable understanding this in terms of Herbert Simon's concept 'bounded rationality,' in which actors are only able to act rationally based on a number of factors (knowledge of what choices are available among them) (Simon 1972), and that increasing knowledge reduces the *bind* on rational decision-making in the market. This market friction, imperfect knowledge of available

choices, is alleviated whenever friends discuss sales on food, job opportunities or available low rent housing.

The third channel I propose in which social capital can provide utility is towards a private safety net that public policy could never provide through impersonal benefit: emergency childcare (Henly 2002), gifts and kinds of maternal support (Edin and Lein 1997). Rebecca M. Ryan and Ariel Kalil note that this kind of support is essential to both the real and perceived economic stresses of the poor (Ryan and Kalil 279). The perceived economic stresses are critical to understanding the benefits of social capital. For, those who build and spend social capital are reinforced in this behavior by its reward; conversely, those who live with low social capital tend to be reinforced by their inability to rely on friends. Working towards enabling those with low social capital to engage even minimally reinforces the trend, as recipients feel more secure in their private safety net.

So, to what extent can non-profit organizations expect to better attenuate poverty by developing social capital? Certainly within the context of such programs, there are those who better build social capital; is their poverty, as understood in terms of food and housing insecurity, alleviated better than those who simply receive and do not interact? This question provides a good test of the importance of social capital. I expect that the social capital built by some in programs provide the poor with a fuller understanding of other programs available and ways to alleviate market frictions, as well as offer the poor the opportunity to develop a stronger private safety net, and that these processes contribute to better attenuation of poverty. I also expect that those who receive benefit without building social capital will face obstacles more easily overcome by those who do build such capital.

2. Methods

In order to test if social capital provides the specific instrumental value for the poor individuals outlined in the previous chapter, I observed and participated at a weekday breakfast program for the poor in Wooster, Ohio. Participant observation (PO) lasted for six weeks over the span of January through February 2013 and continued intermittently throughout March. Soup kitchen type programs provide a number of problems for any quantitative methods of collecting of data; at the program this study examined, only one record is kept: the number of plates served a day. Beyond that, the names, employment status, actual or perceived need, faith, marital status and like of recipients are only as available as recipients choose to make them. Of course, certain characteristics such as race and age may be readily collectable through observation, but such data will likely do little to uncover the instrumental value of social capital in the lives of the poor. Instead, PO provides the best chance of learning about the program, particularly the social interactions that happen, or do not happen, within. What's more, unlike research collected by interview, PO offers a window in to more than just what subjects say about their relationships at the program (Gans 1999).

Prior research has employed similar ethnographic methods at a soup kitchen with promising results (Glasser 1988). Glasser found that while first glimpses of soup kitchens may be confusing and impress a scene of chaos, PO allowed her to understand the intricate and complex social relationships at the program (Glasser 1988 36). Gans, too, notes that PO is well poised to dispel the cursory impressions of journalists and the like (1999 546). In general, PO allows a good mixture of etic perspectives (descriptions and evaluations of behavior and patterns from an outsider's point of view) and emic

perspectives (the interpretations and meanings held by subjects) (Glasser 1988). Perhaps most compelling, understanding the importance and effect of social relationships in the program may best be understood by entering the social structure itself.

In order to do just that, I needed to interact with as many members as possible. Much like a high school cafeteria, reoccurring groups inhabit many tables at the breakfast program each day. There was, of course, some overlap among different social groups at such a sized program, particularly given the high sociability of so many recipients. Getting to know the top socialites was an initial priority, and simply identifying and sitting with them helped break into the scene.

Though PO is revered for its less obtrusive collection of data, the expectation of subject consent required significant care to balance research goals and research ethics. Hoping to observe truly natural interactions of subjects after informing them of my research would serve impossible. However, length of PO here matters; the longer the researcher stays, the less the novelty of her presence influences behavior. To be sure, many subjects acted up on my first few days there. By the end I am sure that some considered me just another breakfast recipient. The manner of getting consent, too, matters. Simple courtesies such as asking to join a table and using simple language to explain my presence helped. When asking to join a table, I introduced myself using this practiced script: 'My name is Ben Strange. I am a college student, and I'm writing a paper about this program and hope to learn more about it. I would like to ask for your permission to just sit and eat with you and to write about what I listen to later.'

If they agreed I would proceed to give them a form requesting their verbal consent that had more information about who I was and why I was there and say: 'This form

explains who I am and why I'm here, and that you can refuse to talk with me if you wish. If you do, there will be no consequences for your relationship with the breakfast program, and you can withdraw your consent at any time. You don't need to sign the form, just give me your verbal consent and you can hold on to it. You'll also see it has my number and other contact information if you'd like to reach me.' Requiring written consent was rejected for a number of reasons. Asking for a signature from a population with potentially limited reading comprehension would at best heighten distrust and at worst ask them to sign something that, though they understood cognitively, may be less apt to follow on paper. The first would damage the research; the later would generally make me uneasy.

The problems with PO are of course numerous. Any attempt to describe relationships and their benefits at the breakfast program would invariably, at some level, come with my own biases. Acknowledging this may be the only method to mitigate its effect. Fortunately, the nuanced understanding that PO offers provides ample opportunity to reflect on such bias through narrative, and such discussion is present throughout the analysis and discussion of this study. I believe I have been dutiful enough in my rich descriptions to allow the reader to decide if I am presenting bias, which undoubtedly some will conclude.

The more important limitation of PO as a methodology for this study is the low chance it provides to guide discussion towards my research interests. At some level, the breadth and depth and general importance of social capital's use to recipients at the program may best be judged by *not* explicitly asking about it (that is, if social capital is truly as palpable and necessary as I theorized, it is likely to be made clear without effort).

However, it would have been a shame to come away from the program not having at least asked a few recipients some pointed questions (if only to extend upon the findings of PO). Thus, as I developed stronger relationships with specific members, I asked them to participate in a more formal interview. The interviews were conducted both at and outside of the program, and the protocol for consent was identical to the process for PO, with the exception of a consent form tailored to an interview. These questions focused mostly on how interacting with people at the program may have helped them in ways extending beyond the meal provided.

In order to test the theories outlined in the previous chapter, interviewees and subjects of PO were chosen based on a number of criteria. The most illuminating were perhaps with recipients who acted as ‘leaders’ or ‘interceptors’ in the community. They were those who knew the most about the social network of the program and those who went out of their way to meet new people. Recipients who were new to the program, too, were courted for interviews. Recipients with little social capital built through the program were the hardest to secure for an interview, either by their infrequent attendance or hesitance to interact in general at the program. Only one such interview took place, and occurred after offering the recipient a ride to the next town. Recording data presented a number of important considerations. PO in this setting did not lend itself to note taking inside the program. Instead, data was recorded physically and immediately following PO sessions on paper. Aliases were used in place of recipients’ actual names both in this study and in my notes, and notes were locked in my desk throughout the study. The process for recording data collected in interviews was identical.

Coding my independent variable, levels of social capital among recipients, was relatively basic; based on apparent popularity in the program, willingness or reluctance to interact socially and frequency of attendance individuals were assigned the tag of 'low' 'medium' or 'high' social capital. Willingness to participate and frequency of attendance were perhaps the most critical to establishing which group an individual was placed in; while some unpopular recipients still appeared to have access to social capital, those who refused to sit with others, attended the program rarely or did other things to distance themselves from others were much less able to build it. It should also be noted that little difference was anticipated between those with medium and high social capital, particularly in access to knowledge of area services. Most services were ubiquitous enough that even the most modest levels of social capital were enough to be made aware.

The dependent variable was measured on instances where narrative provided explicit evidence of attenuation of poverty extending beyond the provided meal in one or more of the three theoretical mechanisms proposed in the previous chapter; first, instances where recipients have extensive knowledge of other programs in the area; likewise, if a recipient appeared to have needed and received help through potential market frictions (knowledge of economic choices available, loans), such results were coded as heightened attenuation of poverty; finally, if recipients had extensive private safety nets which they could call on in times of need and experienced a psychological attenuation of poverty, they were coded as having heightened attenuation of poverty. The absence of these three in any explicit sense would lend towards coding that individual as receiving no benefits extending beyond the meal provided at the Trinity UCC. Based on these factors, and

some analysis, I have coded recipients as having ‘low,’ ‘moderate,’ or ‘high’ poverty attenuation.

The following chapters represent my findings and conclusions. First, I will give in the broad sense my findings from participant observation; the most basic description of how my coding scheme was applied to recipients for both the dependent and independent variable with brief discussion of how those findings conform or break with theories outlined in this study. This chapter will focus far more on how coding of the independent variable, levels of social capital, was produced, as the next chapters are focused on narratives surrounding the dependent variable. The following two chapters will elaborate on specific recipients and attempt to explain through narrative the aspects of their lives that conform or break with theories outlined in this study.

It is worth commenting on what made for effective participant observation. Knowing your environment and making assessments about the people you’re sitting with were the earliest and most important lessons. When talking to any of the religious recipients, blaspheming would have been a categorically bad idea. When talking to some of the less ‘respectable’ figures, being prepared to cuss and discuss illegal activity were invaluable. You need to be malleable, but you need to be honest. It was an occupational advantage that I both play bluegrass and have limited respect for agents of the law; but knowing when to mention which was crucial. Caring about what you brought with you to the program, such as coffee mugs bearing the college’s logo, or what clothes you wear were also important lessons to learn. I left the pea coat at home and threw on my Carhartt; I drank the terrible coffee there. If you’re going to a meal program, go hungry. Showing up

and not eating is tantamount to showing up with a tape recorder and a suit: you don't belong.

In short, the researcher in participant observation must balance an important line between acting and honesty. To be sure, I am not encouraging researchers to fake attitudes or pretend they are something they are not. But, be sure to draw from whatever you possess in your personality, and maybe not offer some things too easily, to convince research subjects that you are at *home* where ever you are. Simple things like modifying your vocabulary and posture go a long way; I never once used the phrase 'social capital,' or 'Benthamian-utility,' and I sure took every cue to slouch I could (I have terrible posture, anyway). You might as well be interviewing for a job, trying to purchase alcohol underage or convincing a girl that you are in fact mature—and you should analyze your every move in much the same way. If you can succeed there, participant observation may be for you.

The breakfast program itself also merits a description before launching into data. Physically, it is in the basement of a church. A very nice, carpeted, bright, warm basement, in fact, with perhaps twenty large tables (some circular, some square). A long counter with a number of heated trays separates the main room from a large kitchen; I know this kitchen well, as I volunteered in the kitchen before crossing to 'the other side,' as my co-volunteers say. It is everything a kitchen needs to be to cook for over a hundred people (as some times the program needs to). Number in attendance varies, but comes and goes in a predictable pattern. While many attend every day, the numbers dramatically increase towards the end of the month as assistance checks run out.

At 8:15 am the outside doors open. Depending on which volunteers are scheduled, and the temperature outside, sometimes the doors are opened earlier. More often myself and other recipients waited outside, in sometimes single digit weather, and complained. When those doors are opened, recipients file down to the basement. A table waits for them with a number of day-old products from a certain national bakery chain and the aforementioned terrible coffee, as well as some peanut butter, jam and something resembling cream cheese. This table is the prelude to the main course, served at 8:30 to a hustling line, and varies depending on day of the week: Monday, French toast and sausage links; Tuesday, scrambled eggs and sausage links; Wednesday, egg casserole; Thursday, biscuits and potatoes with sausage gravy; Friday, pancakes and sausage links. Each day also offered hot, buttered toast.

Having worked behind the counter I knew that every meal was essentially designed to get as many cheap calories to recipients as possible. All eggs were cooked in sausage grease, and the scrambled eggs constituted of approximately 1/3rd breadcrumbs. The egg casserole always has some manner of meat chunks in it, though what kind varies week to week. Committing to participant observation essentially guaranteed that I would need to give up vegetarianism.

In terms of atmosphere, the breakfast program would perhaps appear as chaos to anyone visiting for the first time. But, perhaps this would be the case with any large group of people who know each other (perhaps too well) and are given a large room to interact in. I imagine that any one of the breakfast recipients would feel out of place in my college's cafeteria at 6:00 pm. I was immensely lucky in that I knew at least what tenor to expect, and even a few of the recipients recognized me, as a former volunteer. The large

majority of recipients arrive as early as possible, though there are never food shortages. When they leave is a split matter: many are content to eat and leave as soon as possible, others stayed as long as they could either for company or warmth.

Having attended another meal program in Wooster, I am at least prepared to comment on *their* similarity, if not the extent to which Trinity is a 'typical' meal program. Much like at Trinity, the other meal program in question holds its doors until it is nearly ready to serve the meal (though in this case, dinner). Similarly, the meal is released later on while coffee is available instantly. It seems that more recipients leave this program immediately following the meal, though there is less reason to stay for warmth: many at Trinity only need wait until 9:30 when the public library opens for their next source of heat.

*Living below in this old sinful world,
hardly a comfort I can afford.
Striving alone to face temptation sore,
where could I go but to the Lord?*

*Where could I go, oh where could I go
seeking a refuge for my soul?
Needing a friend to save me in the end
where could I go but to the Lord?*

James B. Coats

3. Building Social Capital & Results from Participant Observation

In this chapter I plan to introduce a full cast of characters and the most basic findings from participant observation by examining how each subject in the study succeeds, fails or neglects to build social capital at the breakfast program. For each individual or pair, I will introduce their level of commitment to being social, to building trust and how they attempt or do not attempt to curry favor from other recipients, with perhaps a bit of color, in order to inform the narratives built in later chapters. I will also briefly mention the levels of poverty attenuation apparent for each individual, though the details therein are reserved for chapters four and five. In this chapter I have organized individuals into three categories; three of the primary social groups I sat with—"The Gossips," "The Loners," "The Misfits"—and floaters. Floaters may be a misleading name, but it is simply meant to represent those who either have no connections to others, fleeting connections to others, or those who were social with many different groups.

First, here are the raw findings of participant observation (Table 1). Individuals are listed with their alias, level of social capital and level of poverty attenuation. Both social capital and poverty attenuation are ranked from low, to medium or moderate, to high. The following sections will attempt to explain how social capital figures were determined,

and in some cases the story of their poverty attenuation, while chapters four and five will attempt to develop fuller narratives of poverty attenuation through social capital, or the lack thereof.

Table 1: Individuals, Organized by Social Group
Coded for Social Capital and Poverty Attenuation

The Gossips	Soc. Capital	Poverty Att.		Soc. Capital	Poverty Att.
<i>Homer</i>	High	Moderate	<i>Ricky</i>	Low	Low
<i>Rose</i>	High	Moderate	<i>Jeff</i>	Medium	Moderate
<i>Smiley</i>	Medium	Moderate	<i>Scott</i>	High	High
<i>John</i>	Low	Low	<i>Chuck</i>	Low	Medium

The Misfits	Soc. Capital	Poverty Att.		Soc. Capital	Poverty Att.
<i>Thomas</i>	Low	Low	<i>Marcus</i>	Medium	Moderate
<i>Jay</i>	Medium	Moderate			

The Loaners	Soc. Capital	Poverty Att.		Soc. Capital	Poverty Att.
<i>Zac</i>	Low	Low	<i>Matilde</i>	Low	Low
<i>Justin</i>	Low	Low			

Floater	Soc. Capital	Poverty Att.		Soc. Capital	Poverty Att.
<i>Jerry</i>	High	High	<i>Tobias</i>	Low	Low
<i>Rob</i>	Medium	Moderate	<i>Clint</i>	High	High
<i>Adam</i>	Low	Low	<i>Claire</i>	Medium	Moderate

The Gossips

Homer and Rose

Homer, 72, donning a denim jacket, approached me outside of the church my first morning; he spoke slowly, with authority and began to ask where I was from (begged by my Vermont license plate) until his partner, Rose, perhaps a few years younger, cut him off to ask the same. After speaking with Homer and Rose for a few moments outside (while we waited for the doors to open), it became clear that they would be delighted to

talk more with me over breakfast. I can comfortably say that throughout my time observing behavior at the breakfast program, no two people seemed more interested in the lives of others than they clearly were. In fact, their discourse provided an invaluable list of who to later receive consent from and observe. Occasionally this took the form of actively worrying about others; more often, it was incorrigible gossip. Their methods of building social capital were too incredibly useful for the purposes of research; Homer, who manages his Social Security check well, gives loans to a wide breadth of breakfast recipients on a seemingly weekly basis. In addition to loaning money, my very first day at the program Homer purchased a guitar from another breakfast attendee—one who had every intention of later buying the guitar back for the same price. This ability and willingness to loan, either with or without collateral, makes Homer quite popular with a number of recipients.

Rose, who often encourages Homer to loan to specific individuals whom she respects, builds social capital by handing out an obscene number of cigarettes daily. Each day at the breakfast program she hands out at least a pack (admittedly, they are the cheapest brand available by the carton) to almost anyone who asks. A typical interaction with Rose will end with her interlocutor leaving with four or five cigarettes and Rose proceeding to tell their secrets to anyone at the table who will listen (I, probably for being the newest, received the majority of the unprovoked gossip—for which I did not complain). She does not smoke herself. Indeed, it seems to be an entirely instrumental method of building social capital and gaining access to the lives and secrets of other breakfast goers.

Both Homer and Rose, though have extremely high social capital, receive modest poverty attenuation through their connections at the program. At best I can note

instances where friends who receive cigarettes often in turn give presents to Rose, while Homer clearly receives the support of a group of friends who worry about his health (Homer suffers from diabetes, leukemia and went through a bout with the flu this winter).

Smiley

I met Smiley about a year before I began this study while volunteering at the Trinity UCC, and was surprised to find that he remembered me (I had eaten with him a handful of times then). He draws no earned income, though he reports to volunteer some forty hours a week at The Oasis Club, a safe and sober hangout spot open to anyone, and the site of many Alcohol and Narcotic Anonymous meetings. Smiley is quiet, though when he does speak is incredibly affable and humorous. He has many postulates on morality, though I have never heard him speak a mean word to another person who might transgress those principles.

He once came close by suggesting to me that it was wrong for Chuck (Rose's son) to sell his food stamps to others at 50 cents on the dollar and spend the revenue on alcohol, only to have to borrow money from Rose and Homer throughout the rest of the month to eat. However, his lecture was pitying as it was rebuking, and far from unfeeling. Most seem to know this, and I did not meet anyone who said they disliked him. Though, he has lost some trust from Rose for failing to pay back a large loan in a timely manner (though he has paid back a large portion of it incrementally over a year). I rate his social capital at medium, and do the same for his level of poverty attenuation; he received the large one time loan and often receives help with computer skills from friends he refers to The Oasis Club.

John

John sits with The Gossips every day but almost never talks. He spoke only once directly to me (though he will nod and smile if I say hi or ask how he is) and with a very nervous and stuttering voice explained that he and all his brothers had Biblical names. It would be very hard to say if John has any social capital to spend, mostly because I have never known him to ask for any help. I would not exactly be surprised if Rose or Homer, for instance, would be willing to offer John help should he ask, but they are yet to go out of their way to ask about his needs in my presence. For this reason I rate both his social capital and poverty attenuation from the program low.

Ricky

Ricky is an even clearer example on the limits vague of friendship than John. He is popular enough and attends most days, and though he sits at a table across from The Gossips he converses with them. However, there is a difference between building social capital and having friends (just as Smiley's social capital diminished with the loan but Rose is perfectly pleased to eat and talk with him). Ricky consistently ribs other breakfast goers and tries to appear as distant as possible from both their lives and his need to eat at the church. He often makes a point of mentioning how frequently he eats out (though I came to find out these were lies) and a point of telling others and me that he only goes to the church to be social. This must be a flat lie, as he spends much of breakfast in total silence at his own table. His unwillingness to build social capital will be discussed in the fifth chapter of this study, as his subsequent poverty attenuation is directly congruent with the theory presented in this study. Much like John, though he has a home at the program, both his social capital and poverty attenuation levels are quite low.

Jeff

Jeff is fairly quiet and always smiling, though often sardonically. When I first started at the breakfast program he had been away for some time, though I never learned why. Rose, who is probably his best friend at the program, heralded his return emphatically. He doesn't talk to a lot of people, but seems to build significant social capital with specific individuals (particularly Rose). I consider him to have medium levels of social capital, and not high only because of how he concentrates his friend group. There are limits to relying on one person, and it is unclear if Jeff could ask of anyone save Rose, or perhaps Homer, for a hand. However, even based on solely those relationships, he still receives moderate poverty attenuation.

Scott

If it were not for Jerry (introduced later as a true floater), Scott would be the primary center of attention at breakfast. Though he always sits with The Gossips, a number of people stop by to talk to him on their way into or out of the breakfast program. Once a sailor, Scott sings lewd limericks and blows Reveille on a kazoo multiple times each meal, though is occasionally sullen and downtrodden. He lacks much self efficacy in the labor market, and though he cites his fear that epilepsy will prevent him from employment, alcohol is frequently a problem in his life. When jovial, he, and Homer for laughing, receive frequent rebuke from Rose for his rude behavior. However, even she likes him very well. Nicknamed Santa Claus, Scott brings Rose a number of gifts weekly, including cases of Diet Coke and second hand winter clothing. He once told me that he does it so that Rose will continue to loan him money, which she does quite frequently when his social security check runs out. Scott is part of a large collective of

those who have built enough social capital with Rose to borrow money—but his poverty attenuation exists even beyond that, as discussed in chapter four. A contender for the most social capital of any recipient, Scott easily has high levels of social capital. The social capital he builds profits him well; he receives high poverty attenuation extending beyond the meal from the program.

Chuck

Rose's son, Chuck, is a semi-consistent breakfast recipient at best. It is unclear if he would be well liked or even social were it not for his mother's popularity, but in any case he always sits with The Gossips. Speaking with a low growl, I've only heard him talk to ask his mother for cigarettes, to ask Homer for money, or once to ask me for how long I had played the banjo. Rose won't let Chuck live with her anymore due to Chuck's alcoholism; he is often drunk at breakfast, and, according to rumor, sells his food stamps to others for fifty cents on the dollar to buy beer. He draws a check of some kind from the federal government as well, perhaps for disability, and earns money through a number of illicit means (including the training of gamecocks for cockfighting). However, his alcohol habit dries up what cash he receives quickly, so he returns to breakfast for a meal and the chance to borrow money from Homer or Rose. He currently lives with a sort of girlfriend who, according to his mother, is unfaithful, takes his money and beats him. Given the nature of his relationship with Rose, it's hard to know how true this is. However, he twice went to the hospital for mysteriously vague injuries during my time at the program.

Chuck seems uninterested in building any social capital at breakfast. This is not to say that he is disagreeable, just that his inconsistent attendance and limited effort to interact at the program produces cursory friendship at best. His poverty attenuation is

perhaps disproportionately high based on attending the program for it affords him contact with his mother; it is difficult to frame this as social capital in the sense this study has put forth, and I would not feel it diligent to award Chuck with anything above low social capital. Still, his poverty attenuation from the program extends beyond the meal moderately, based solely on Rose's generosity.

The Misfits

Jay and Marcus

Jay is loud, physically large in frame and in control when he wants to be. Late into middle age and black, he probably talks about alcohol more than anything else. Though Jay is often the one to bring it up, Marcus is also quite glad to join a discussion on which are their favorite cheap beers, how to get cans in bulk and how much they could drink in one sitting. I am too easily reminded of the way my college friends discuss how much they can drink and how often they do. In both cases, bragging about consumption eases building social capital to some extent for the individual in the social group. Indeed, I found myself telling Jay and Marcus about my own binge drinking as a way to ease our initial conversation.

Other topics of conversation were more difficult to keep up with Jay and Marcus in; they both have committed felonies and have dealt significantly with the police both in Wooster and Akron. My own interactions with the legal system, though not entirely novice, cannot really be compared to Marcus', which included running drugs from Florida and spending two years in prison. Though, it did put them at ease when I mentioned that I had once been pulled over while driving drunk and on another occasion had my car searched (unsuccessfully) for drugs. They both have built significant social capital among

themselves, and are not entirely unsocial with others. It would be fair to assess their social capital at medium, and I would also note that their poverty attenuation is, charitably taken, moderate.

Thomas

Thomas barely speaks, and seems to vacillate between uninterested and surly. One morning when he got up for coffee, I feigned some concern and asked Jay and Marcus if they thought he was ok. Jay looked at me with something like amused pity and said “Him? Yeah, he’s just *like* that.” I think that Jay and Marcus like Thomas, they just seem to not particularly care about his frequent mood swings, something not totally unreasonable. Still, Thomas’ social capital is noticeably lower than his counterparts. He does little to build it, and in fact seems to have a number of enemies at the program. He once told Rose that her son, Chuck, smelled bad because he drank and went with loose women. Rose noted that this was, in fact, true, but did not need to be reminded by Thomas. This cut him off entirely from The Gossips, who seem to in general think less of The Misfits. Indeed, Smiley has many negative things to say about Jay, as well. Unfortunately for Thomas, he seems to be unable or unwilling to build social capital in even his own friend group.

The Loaners

Zac and Justin

It is unclear if Zac plays a character for me, or is genuinely uninterested in getting along with anyone (with the exception of Justin and Matilde). Throughout my interactions with him he mostly asked if I was “learnin’ anything yet,” and generally derided my purposes for being at the program. However, whenever I asked if he would like

me to leave his table, he would say “of course not.” I think it is probably accurate that he both wanted to distance himself from the program and does not find the purposes of this study very important. The first is incredibly clear for the simple fact that Zac does not eat breakfast at the program, or at least not the hot meal provided—he only drinks coffee and reads his newspaper. Justin, who wears all camouflage and smokes many hand rolled cigarettes, talks to Zac sometimes, to which Zac normally returns a pointed glare. Justin appears to follow these glares as actual conversation. Zac’s long silences are often punctuated by thoughts on the vulgarity of other breakfast goers.

Justin, on the other hand, seems more at peace with the program. Many days he won’t eat, but only because he does not like the food offered. In contrast, when I asked Zac once why he was not eating, he told me that he “[wasn’t] hungry enough to beg.” Later that morning, Zac grabbed one of the many day old pastries. On my first morning eating with Zac and Justin (when, perhaps ironically, I was the only one interested in either breakfast or conventional conversation) as Zac got up to leave for the morning he first reached into his pocket and handed Justin a number of small coins (though he took back a quarter and dime that apparently he had not intended to hand over). It is entirely unclear why he did this, and I am hesitant to speculate.

Zac and Justin are full of these enigmatic exchanges, and the best understanding I can offer may be found in an aspect of Zac’s worldview that he shared with me that morning: “trusting no one is the second rule of survival.” The two may not mind me sitting with them at breakfast, but I doubt that any researcher could effectively penetrate the hardened distrust and isolation that Zac has built for himself, and that Justin, to some degree, seems to share. Their low levels of trust are foundational in understanding why

they have such low social capital, as they do. Zac attends the program every day, but I don't know if he can claim to have a friend there (with the exception of Justin, and of Matilde, who I will describe momentarily). Justin is just as distant and attends infrequently to boot. As for poverty attenuation, it seems that neither receives anything extending beyond the meal. And, in the case of Zac, he doesn't even receive that.

Matilde

For all the confusion already presented by Zac and Justin's relationship, they are further enigmatic when considering their occasional friend, Matilde, a bubbly woman perhaps in her late seventies who has probably never had a mean thought to share. My first conversation with her centered around her recent volunteer work canvassing for President Barack Obama's reelection campaign. When I asked why she decided to get involved she said simply "Well, I think he's a good president and I thought that he should be elected again." However, she found the practical act of canvassing less appealing after a number of people disagreed with her: "I just don't have it in me to get into politics." She doesn't begrudge any of the people who did not want to talk to her, not even the one who slammed the door in her face; but she definitely learned that political discourse is not her game. It seems that she attends breakfast because her son also goes, and he is able to offer her a ride. Why she chooses to sit with Zac and Justin I am yet to understand, but it is clear that if anyone could tolerate them it would be her. Still, her choice to only interact with those uninterested in building social capital determines her own noticeably low levels. It's hard to say how much poverty attenuation she needs, but it is definitely clear that she does not receive any extending beyond the meal.

Floaters

Jerry

As much as Homer and Rose know everyone, everyone knows Jerry. In his late fifties, with the face of an older man, he walks around the breakfast hall with the energy of a twelve year old, talking to and touching nearly everyone. He is mentally retarded, missing almost all of his visible teeth and yells horribly slurred words—it took me a full two weeks to understand a single thing he said. But most recipients have dealt with him long enough to follow his speech.³ Nearly everyone picks on Jerry incessantly. Well, he gives it back, too. Neither side really launches a damning epigram. Most insults center around his interesting desire to collect pocket books, or mentioning the time someone saw Jerry walking down the street in a sundress. His comeback is unfailingly some variant on “you be quiet, you!” But it is in good fun; everyone likes, or at least tolerates Jerry.

Jerry is from Orville, about 11 miles away from Wooster, and owns no car. He lives with his niece who sometimes drives him into town—otherwise he walks or hitchhikes to breakfast every morning. People walking long distances for the free meal is not totally uncommon at Trinity, but no one walks as far or as frequently as Jerry—especially not during the winter. Over my seven weeks of observation Jerry was the most noticeable figure in either his presence or absence; if 9:00 am rolled around and no one had seen him yet, people started to talk or speculate about why he was not in. By most accounts his niece is considered a mean person who treats Jerry badly, and generally receives the blame when Jerry can’t make it to breakfast. It is an understatement when I

³ Indeed, from the first day of participant observation I see in my notes “Jerry—cannot understand him at all, others seem to be able to??”

say that Jerry has high social capital, and it pays dividends; for reasons we will discuss in chapter four, his poverty attenuation as a result of the program is also high.

Rob

I suspect that my time at the breakfast program was too short to understand the complexities of Rob's social capital. Both he and his wife attend frequently and everyone seems to know them, though they sit alone. My very first day at breakfast Rob sat with The Gossips, however, and seems to have a strong relationship with Homer. In fact, Homer purchased a guitar from Rob that very first day and the two took turns playing songs for each other. It is important to note also that Rob planned to buy the guitar back from Homer for the same price at some point in the future; it has not happened yet, though they have spoken of it since at least once. In the lens of the sale as a loan, it may serve us well to consider that Rob, though he had some social capital with Homer, was perhaps not rich enough in their friendship to secure a sizable loan without the collateral of the guitar. Still, Homer's willingness to purchase a guitar from Rob (particularly since he owns four quite nice instruments already) shows some level of social capital expenditure on Rob's part. For this, I conclude that he has built medium social capital, and for it receives moderate poverty attenuation extending beyond a meal.

Adam

Adam may have the lowest social capital of anyone at the breakfast program. I met him partway through participant observation (for he attends rarely and sits alone) and was genuinely intrigued by how strange he is. When I told Adam that I was a student from the college, he immediately launched into a discussion of his own academic endeavors. Primarily, he is composing a novel centered on two modern orphans, their encounters

with the Aztecs, and their struggle to overcome the superficiality of the physical world by means of astral projection. He denies that the work is fiction, citing that it's "a little too personal to be called that." He hopes that we will stop using oil, as it is the lifeblood of mother earth. He claims that he can feel when notes are out of tune, and describes the sensation with the same vocabulary used by those with perfect pitch, though he had never heard that term before I mentioned it. He is a diagnosed schizophrenic, homeless, has little to offer the labor market, and I believe the world is richer for him.

Adam just moved to the area, and it seems he is yet to make any actual friends. My second day knowing him he told me he was going to go look at an apartment in Rittman. It was twelve degrees outside, and when I asked him how far away Rittman was, he told me about ten miles, but that he had his bike. Many breakfast recipients live in Rittman, for instance Homer and Rose, but he knew no one well enough to ask for a ride. Hoping to get an interview out of him, I offered to take him to Rittman and he thankfully agreed. There is no doubt that Adam's social capital is very low, and indeed we see very limited poverty attenuation, if any, extending beyond the meal. Chapter five includes a narrative on Adam's limited ability to build and spend social capital.

Claire

Short and a little gruff in conversation, Claire is a somewhat regular at breakfast. She is pregnant and lives with her boyfriend—though he is currently in prison. She has her boyfriend's name tattooed across her neck, and frequently seeks out an ear to talk about how much she misses him. She seems interested in building friendships at the program, if mostly for that reason. She never sits alone, though neither does she sit with anyone in particular consistently. I only met Adam because she sat with him one day, and I am yet

to see the two interact since. Still, she seems well connected enough: on her way out, she stops to chat with Rose about whatever good gossip there is, and to ask for a number of cigarettes.

Clint

An incredibly central figure to story of social capital at the breakfast program, Clint is in many ways one of Wooster's greatest assets in fighting the effects of poverty. Until recently (for reasons discussed in chapter four) Clint served as the unofficial mayor, or 'chief,' of a collective of Wooster's homeless population that lives together on federal right of way land near US-30. His self-proclaimed title, chief, comes from his insistence that his American Indian blood qualifies the community as a Native American reservation, a story he began to popularize when the city of Wooster began trying to disperse residents. He also claims that he began proceedings to sue the state of Ohio for treason to the federal government for trying to oust American Indians from their land. He then went on to say that this legal strategy was particularly effective because the penalty for treason during a time of war (for which he cited the War on Poverty and the War on Drugs) is death. When he asked if I would like to see the legal papers accounting for these claims, which apparently he keeps in the enormous briefcase always on his person, I politely declined.

Whether or not, or to what extent, Clint's story is true falls practically irrelevant to this study;⁴ the pertinent facts I have been able to piece together are that first, the city of Wooster did try to push inhabitants off the land, second, Wooster gave up on these efforts and third, most credit Clint with protecting the homeless from government

⁴ However, it is at least interesting to note that a number of regional and state news outlets carried the story, and specifically mentioned Clint's legal defense against the Ohio government.

strong-arms. He is the champion of the destitute in Wooster. He speaks incredibly well, is abjectly poor and his attention to the flair of courtroom drama is dwarfed only by the supreme injustice he feels being done to him and Wooster's homeless population. And whatever can be said about his perhaps asinine defense his homeless community, I have heard no one disagree when he launches a damning polemic against each and every other avenue the homeless have in Wooster, which by everyone's account are quite bad.

The hardest working man in the room, I can comfortably say that Clint earns his high levels of social capital. He curries favor with the homeless by securing their tents, getting kerosene for their heaters in the winter, keeping a steady supply of food, and collecting clothes and blankets to hand out at breakfast. He curries favor with the benevolent and affluent by dedicating himself to protecting the most vulnerable and speaking well, giving them a go between to helping the poor—taken cynically, this absolves their responsibility to get involved, or perhaps more charitably it gives them a viable way to help. He curries favor with advocates of the poor by being perhaps the best of us; his critiques of other services in the area raise incredibly important questions for policy, and sharpen our understanding of poverty in Wooster. He is difficult to have a conversation with, but his life and work are too important to always be affable. When he isn't lecturing on policy, he speaks in warm words on the grace of God, and I'm sure that he would be the first to bless his enemy. Clint's social capital is seemingly endless, particularly the extent to which he has capital with such an economically heterogeneous list. Unsurprisingly, this warrior's poverty attenuation is high, as well.

Tobias

Tobias very rarely shows up to the breakfast program. Originally I met him when volunteering at Trinity in the year before this study, and at this time he seemed to be a regular recipient. Given that I was not collecting data then, I have essentially no scope for why he might attend less frequently now. It seems that he was well liked then, and is still well liked now. However, it would be hard to say that he has any social capital built through the program now. The first time he attended during my period of research, breakfast goers who knew him were surprised to find that he had recently been in the hospital. Still, others seem to take interest in his life in a cursory way; many reflect that he used to be quite an athlete and was something of an all-star in high school baseball and basketball. It's hard to say how wanting he is for friendship, but it certainly doesn't seem that he feels the need to build those relationships at Trinity. For his infrequent attendance alone, I am comfortable assessing his social capital as low. Further, I see no evidence to assume that he has received any poverty attenuation greater than the occasional meal from the program.

Concluding Thoughts on Initial Coding

Though this chapter serves mostly as a preface to the important narratives to follow, it is important to note that the coding scheme in its simplicity does provide evidence of a correlation between social capital and poverty attenuation extending beyond the meal. In fact, every recipient who I have coded as having moderate or high levels of social capital in turn receives at least modest poverty attenuation in one or more of the channels I proposed. What's more, it seems that recipient willingness and ability to build and spend social capital were by and large the determinant of poverty attenuation

extending beyond the meal. As such, the narratives in the following chapter serve to more explicitly examine examples of a broader trend discovered at Trinity.

*High on a mountaintop
We live, we love, and we laugh a lot.
Folks up here know what they got,
High on a mountaintop
High on a mountaintop...*

*Never made a lot of money, didn't
have much.
But we're high on life and rich in
love.*

Loretta Lynn

4. Spending Social Capital

In this chapter I highlight a number of cases in which the ability of individuals to spend social capital directly attenuated their poverty. Instances of this were numerous, so rather than structuring results by individuals as in the previous chapter, here I have opted to highlight a number of trends that defined *how* individuals were able to spend their social capital. First, I present an obvious hierarchy of who can receive what from the generous pockets of Homer and Rose; whereas some receive gifts, some are allowed to borrow money, and some are able to sell items to Homer, and who can do which appears entirely bound by how much social capital he or she has with the two. This is a good window into the importance of social capital, as the ability to secure cash immediately is significant to overcoming the market friction of limited savings for the poor. In many cases, the availability of this cash was the difference between making a voluntary market choice that would have benefited a recipient, and not being able to make that same choice.

Imperfect knowledge of what market choices are available is a second market friction that social capital appeared to alleviate. This method of attenuation is perhaps

more intuitive, as those who are interested in engaging in similar kinds of market behavior are likely to discuss their options with one another. This manifested among those with social capital both by discussing low cost housing, low-wage job openings (or advice for how to apply to such a job), or even as simply as what items, typically food or alcohol, were on sale or a better deal. Individuals' access to this too seemed to be entirely linked to how successful they were at building social capital, and I will dedicate a portion of this chapter to explaining the relationships therein.

Those who had built social capital also benefited by increasing their knowledge of other area services, though it seems the threshold of capital required is much lower to receive this benefit than either benefit previously discussed. In this chapter I will discuss the importance of the Trinity breakfast program's ability to connect its recipients with the services provided at The Oasis Club and the community of homeless community near US 30. Perhaps most striking is Trinity's ability to do this without any effort; simply by providing a free breakfast, Clint and Smiley are able to find and help those who need services in addition to a meal. Finally, I will introduce the importance of private support nets, a concept loose enough to include a friend's concern or giving gifts, which attenuate the psychologically detrimental effects of poverty. Those who know they have social capital to fall back on appear more at ease with their poverty, and more likely to increase their investment in further social relationships, while those who do not tend to reinforce their distrust and isolation. Here I will focus mostly on the relationships of The Gossips, both among themselves and with various floaters, as they tend to be the most poised to demonstrate this phenomenon.

Market Frictions

Gifts, Loans and Sales

It is well known that Homer and Rose do well, comparatively. They have savings, they own their home and they manage money well. I have known them to schedule a trip to the bank on the request of a friend for money, though they frequently have whatever minimal cash is asked for on hand. Cash loans are incredibly important for a number of recipients' financial wellbeing. Whereas many breakfast goers receive a lump sum of cash at the beginning of every month from a variety of Government sources, the absence of savings makes it difficult to make up for unforeseen expenses or general mismanagement, particularly later in the month. In general this trend is accounted for in attendance to Trinity: later in the month, many more meals are served once assistant checks run out. The method of poverty attenuation noted here, that is the acquisition of cash from friends by various means, was perhaps the most observable phenomenon of poverty attenuation by explicitly building and spending social capital.

First, not every one can get cash from Rose and Homer. If a would-be recipient is known, they must be somewhat liked to receive any money. This gate is not terribly hard to pass; I've known Rose to hand out five dollars to another based solely on the word of a mutual friend and perhaps ten minutes of conversation. However, in the case of loans, the ability and willingness to pay back in a timely manner was a clear cycle of either building or mismanaging social capital. For those who are able to pay back the loan, it builds trust for future ventures. Those who default, conversely, lose what capital they had built. Scott for instance pays Rose back consistently, or performs a number of important courtesies. If he cannot pay, he makes an effort to remind her that he knows he owes money, that he

appreciates the extended time and frequently brings her what gifts (soda, rings, etc.) he can as a kind of interest. But most importantly, he eventually pays her back. The same is true of Ted; though I have never personally seen him borrow from Homer and Rose, Rose frequently reminds Ted that because he always pays back his debt she would be willing to “loan any time to [him] again.”

Smiley, on the other hand, has entirely squandered what social capital he had built with Rose and Homer over a loan that he failed to pay back. In the spring of 2012, Smiley’s sister died. The death was devastating to Smiley financially, as she took good care of him. Understanding the hardship, Rose and Homer agreed to loan Smiley 200 dollars, to be paid back incrementally with his assistance check. For whatever reason, Smiley has ceased making payments and still owes 80 dollars. Rose knows this and resents it; she and Homer frequently make mention of how they wish ‘people’ would pay them back, and though they are referring to many borrowers, they frequently cast glances at Smiley. They also make sure to remind me of the story whenever Smiley leaves the table.

Some, however, have so much social capital with Rose and Homer that they can receive cash with almost no expectation of repayment. Jeff mentioned one morning that he did not have the cash to pay his cable bill. When Rose offered to pay it, Jeff at first declined her offer, but Rose insisted, citing that Jeff had recently given her a ring that she liked quite a lot. There was no expectation of Jeff’s gift to Rose paying off for him later, he just happened to find it and knew that Rose collected rings. Further, Rose made it explicitly clear that the twenty dollars or so she gave him was a gift, not a loan. This sort of gift economy is prevalent there among those with the most social capital, and Jeff benefits from it greatly as he has such high social capital with Rose.

Some with only modest social capital with Homer or Rose, who may be unable to borrow money in the same way Scott or Ted are, are able to use their social capital to leverage a sale in their favor. The best example of this was the sale of the guitar between Homer and Rob. Rob clearly needed cash, and sold a nice guitar to Homer for probably much less than it was worth, 250 dollars. Homer, who already owns four excellent instruments (though he has quite the proclivity for collecting more), was not burning to buy the instrument, and it is somewhat conspicuous that I have not seen him play it since the sale (as we frequently play music together). Throughout the discussion of what Homer was ready to pay, Rob noted, and Homer acknowledged, that in a few weeks Rob would be 'willing' to buy back the guitar for the same price, whatever they agreed on. It is hard to not see this as a zero interest loan with collateral.

It is perhaps unfortunate for Rob that he would not be able to pay back the 'loan' incrementally, as Smiley was once allowed to do, and I think the daunting task of paying 250 dollars all at once has been prohibitive in buying his instrument back. However, leveraging cash by essentially pawning an item seemed to be Rob's only avenue at the time based on his modest social capital. Had Rob already built further social capital with Homer, it would not be unreasonable to assume that Homer would have loaned him, if not the same amount, at least some cash.

Chuck provides a less neat understanding of receiving a loan through social capital. He has twice in my time at the program received a significant sum of cash from Homer; once as a large loan, and second time Homer bought a ring from him. Chuck had purchased the ring from an acquaintance while drunk for a large sum of money, and later learned it was practically worthless. In both the case of the loan and the sale, Rose urged

Homer to engage in the transaction. It seems unlikely, though not impossible, that Homer would have agreed to such an arrangement were Chuck not Rose's son. I also am unsure how to characterize the kind of capital expended in Chuck's interest. It may be best resolved as Rose expending her own social capital with Homer for her son. Still, perhaps this exchange is not practically effable in the terms relegated to social capital theory.

Still, who is able to receive cash at breakfast, or perhaps more important under what terms they receive it, seems more or less bound to how much social capital they are able to build and manage. In the case of Jeff, his immense social capital built with Rose was the difference between paying his cable bill and waiting until his assistance check came in, possibly paying a late fee. Smiley, who had diminished his social capital with Rose in the past, would have faced this unfortunate market penalty had he been in the same situation. Social capital appears to open credit markets, or even simulate economic wealth, for the poor, providing an important alleviation to the market friction of limited savings.

Imperfect Knowledge

The second market friction discussed in this chapter, imperfect knowledge, refers to situations in which individuals who would otherwise make a rational, beneficial economic choice are constricted by imperfect knowledge of what choices are available. Alleviating imperfect knowledge is an important step towards attenuating poverty, if only because good economic choices for each of us are bound by knowledge of the market. Breakfast recipients know this; the classifieds section of the newspaper, both for cheaper housing and employment opportunities, works its way across every breakfast table in the pursuit of a better choice. However, I would like to instead focus on bettered

knowledge by word of mouth, for it too is prevalent at the breakfast program, particularly between those of modest or higher social capital.

The easier examples to identify came from The Misfits, who spend most of their time discussing their shopping habits. To be sure, Jay and Marcus talk a good deal about what food is on sale, suggestions for where to buy cheaper clothes and other sorts of, maybe I should say, *respectable* economic decisions. But I think it more interesting, and important to their actual poverty attenuation, to acknowledge their pursuit of the most cost effective substances, especially alcohol, or opportunities to make money through illicit activities, especially the sale or transport of illegal drugs. It is also important to mention their discussion of how best to avoid the law, and other legal advice, which aids both their performance of illicit jobs or at the very least prevents or softens economic penalties brought by the legal system.

But perhaps the reader is less interested in abetting this kind of economic activity; I am sympathetic to that, and luckily am prepared to produce further examples of the importance of increased market knowledge. Jerry, as I mentioned in chapter three, lives with his niece and her boyfriend. Very occasionally, Jerry gets a ride to the breakfast program from Orville from her, but more often than not he walks or hitchhikes. Almost no one likes his niece. Her and her boyfriend, according to rumor, essentially live on Jerry's social security check, and some unsavory means of their own, moving from apartment to apartment whenever they can't pay the rent. The issue is further complicated by Jerry's mental retardation, and no one is quite sure if he could manage living on his own.

On two occasions I have heard other breakfast goers attempt to convince Jerry to consider specific housing away from his niece. First, Ricky suggested once that Jerry look into an apartment that he had heard of. He noted that the rent was more than low enough to allow Jerry to live there on his check, and that the location of the apartment itself would provide easy walking access to the meal programs Jerry goes to and other downtown services. Second, Rose and Homer attempted to convince Jerry to move into a kind of subsidized assisted living program for the elderly or mentally handicapped who live on government assistance. The program is in Wooster and, according to Rose and Homer, would satisfy all of Jerry's needs. However important knowing that these alternative living situations existed, and that they would be more stable and cheaper than his current arrangements, were lost on Jerry. It is unclear if he even understood what was offered to him, and the limitations of increasing market knowledge for individuals like Jerry is something that we will discuss in the final chapter of this study.

Scott provides another interesting take on the ability of individuals with social capital to convert knowledge gained into poverty attenuated. Rose and Homer have often suggested that he look into another living situation—as I understand it, he lives rather out of the way and his life would be easier were he to live closer to town. They suggest various apartment complexes, or services like Wayne Metro (discussed further in the following section) to help Scott move to somewhere economically better for him. But perhaps the most important knowledge Scott has received, also from Homer and Rose, comes from the knowledge that his epilepsy, particularly since he has not had a seizure in years, should not prevent him from employment. At first he did not believe them, but it seems that he

is starting to accept that he is unlikely to receive discrimination in the labor market for being epileptic.

Rational actors can only make decisions based on what choices they are aware of. Understanding what options are available, particularly in the instance of large expenditures such as housing, is invaluable when managing money. This is true for all classes, but perhaps especially for the poor. When every expense must be scrutinized, every option should be made known. Those who built social capital at Trinity were better posed to consider what choices were available, and are better economically for it.

Knowledge of Area Services

Much as was the case with imperfect *market* knowledge, knowledge of what services tailored to helping the poor exist in Wooster (apart from Trinity) increase with levels of social capital. Wayne Metropolitan Housing Authority is an excellent example of this. Set up to rent housing to low-income families based on a percentage of their income not on a fixed rate, Wayne Metro serves many breakfast goers. They also run a program designed to help low-income families with the down payment or deposit for housing. However, knowing it exists or how to apply provides a daunting challenge, particularly for those who have talked to no one who uses the services. Still, it is not a secret; among those with even moderate social capital, nearly every discussion of housing for a friend at some point revolves around the services provided by Wayne Metro (Smiley noted to Scott that he in fact uses the service and that it is good for him, which seemed to encourage Scott to think about looking into the program).

The Oasis Club provides another instance of potentially hidden area services that could benefit the poor. If not for the informational pamphlets about addiction adorning

the wall next to the door, The Oasis Club could pass for a teen center with its pool table, couches, televisions and computers. Smiley notes that this is a good thing and that really it is supposed to just be a safe place to hang out. In fact, he often flatly denies that The Oasis Club is a rehabilitation center. However, his dedication to helping people stay sober is clear, if only by the absurd number of hours he volunteers at the club each week. Smiley's connection to both the breakfast program and The Oasis Club is an important one; many poor people in Wooster have been referred there by Smiley after meeting him at the program, either for alcohol and narcotics anonymous meetings or just for a place to watch television or use the computer. In fact, Smiley uses the Internet connection at The Oasis Club to take classes online on both psychology and computer literacy. And, though I have not spent extensive time at The Oasis Club, it would not be difficult to surmise that the same processes of building and spending social capital are fostered there as they are at the breakfast program.

The homeless community on US 30 has provided a sense of community and protection among many of the homeless for upwards of 10 years, and many are taken in directly from the breakfast program. Whereas Clint procures tents, food, kerosene and blankets for the residents of his community, his presence is totally ubiquitous at Trinity. His high levels of social capital guarantee a somewhat stable level of food and amenities for those who live in his community. Further, it takes a nearly infinitesimal amount of social capital to find out who Clint is and what his community offers; Adam was able to locate to Clint's community almost immediately after attending the breakfast program. Admittance to the community is almost certain for any individual pending they ask and are willing to not bring drugs or alcohol with them.

The threshold of social capital required to learn about these other services is admittedly minimal, but that does not diminish the importance of what Trinity has to offer. Yes, Adam, who has incredibly low levels of social capital, may benefit very little from the economy of loans and discussions of market knowledge held at Trinity, but his story points out that nearly anyone draws utility extending beyond a meal. Smiley, too, does a good job of seeking out floaters who may need services offered at The Oasis Club. Low social capital, it seems, is even enough social capital to enhance the utility of a meal.

Private Support Networks and Self-Perceptions of Poverty

Psychologists and sociologists may be more poised to examine the full benefits of community, or specifically of giving and receiving gifts, in the lives of the poor than I am. However, what I saw of the stark differences in terms of joy and emotional wellbeing was sufficient enough to convince me that building social capital has at least some psycho-economic importance. Giving of gifts, or of loans in the case of Homer and Rose, clearly built a sense of agency among those who felt they were able to give. Receiving, too, alleviates the perception of poverty for many. Claire, hopefully, never need buy her own cigarettes based on how many Rose gives her daily (this is the case with many recipients in addition to Claire). Jerry is undeniably tickled when Rose finds a pocketbook to give him.

Finally, Rose receives a seemingly endless stream of rings from friends, rings that often seem to symbolize an implicit thank you for loans given. Thus, gift giving serves both as an effect and cause of social capital; while the opportunity to give and receive is clearly beholden to the existence of friendships, the process itself seems to be a necessary way to maintain the social capital already built. This became incredibly evident to me through my own relationship with Rose and Homer; after I had spent significant time

with them, and played a lot of music with Homer, the two became insistent on giving me something, usually cash. No matter how politely I declined, Rose and Homer conveyed an unmistakable coldness to me after I told them I did not need or want their gift.

This psycho-economic benefit of social capital, that is, the relief of the self-perception of poverty, is important for reinforcing the drive to build and spend social capital. If the benefits of gift giving and receiving do not illustrate the psychological benefits well enough, then I urge the reader to continue on to chapter 5. The narratives of Zac, Adam and Ricky should provide sufficiently supplementary evidence. For, while the presence of social capital may affect positively the psycho-economic status of recipients in a milky fashion, the converse effect is egregious in social capital's absence, and causes the recipient to distance themselves further from others.

*I ain't got no home, I'm just a-roamin' 'round,
Just a wandrin' worker, I go from town to town.
And the police make it hard wherever I may go.
And I ain't got no home in this world anymore.*

Woody Guthrie

5. No Capital to Spend

In this chapter I share the stories of whom I met who were unable to convert social capital into poverty attenuation, especially those who simply had no capital to spend. There are perhaps fewer stories like this to tell from Trinity's breakfast program, since the very nature of a meal program attracts those who are more social. However, examples of low social capital are therefore all the more noticeable, and their effects are pronounced. Suffice to say, those at the breakfast program who were unable or unwilling to build social capital experienced poverty categorically worse than those who did. Much as with the previous chapter, here I have opted to group similar instances of low poverty attenuation, rather than process individuals one at a time. The first instance of this is perhaps the least illuminating, though still worth mentioning; those who live in rural poverty, who are also unable to rely on friends, fall victim to very specifically rural problems, among them transportation and services that exist only in a more developed market. In short, isolation in a rural area affects the poor negatively.

Second, those with low social capital were exceptionally less able to secure cash loans for necessary purchases (specifically housing and prescription drugs). In this chapter I will discuss more fully Adam and Ricky, for their stories are the most representative of the two different forms low social capital took; whereas Adam recently moved to the area and has made at least some effort, though in vain, to make friends (by way of social

awkwardness, unfamiliarity with already existing social groups and timidity), Ricky has essentially self-selected his low social capital. That is to say, Ricky could have friends were he not so concerned with maintaining a feigned distance between himself and the program. However, both he and Adam were unable to secure loans when they needed them. This distinction between Adam and Ricky is the third aspect of lesser poverty attenuation suffered by many with low social capital; many individuals, specifically Ricky and Zac, suffered psychological aversion to seeking out friendships or asking for help, perhaps both a cause and effect of low social capital.

Obstacles of Rural Poverty

Thomas lives in Wooster, but has no car. Given that most of what he needs can be acquired on foot in town, he infrequently has real need for a ride from a friend. However, some Friday in early February, Thomas needed to have his cell phone serviced. I confess that I did not understand what precisely he needed done to his device, but the tech aspect is immaterial. Thomas' issue was that no vendor in Wooster could do it, and he needed a ride to Akron. He asked me if I would drive him, saying that he would pay me gas money. I couldn't sacrifice the two hours the trip would take (though I sorely missed the opportunity for an interview), so I asked him if he knew anyone else who could take him. He told me he had "been askin' around," but that no one was able to that day, and he needed it done soon. While silently doubting that he had in fact asked around, I politely refused, but said that if no one had helped him out by Monday I would be willing to drive him then. Apparently the cell phone was too vital to wait until Monday; Thomas told me that he continued to ask around, but no one was willing to take him, so he had bought a new phone.

Limited Savings and Failure to Secure Loans

If the narratives of those who can frequently borrow cash did not convince the reader of the importance of social capital, then I am sorry to say that I hope the destitution of those who are less able will be more effective. When entering the market with little or no savings, an assistance check is really only good for the sustenance of whatever present arrangements; and does little good for one time, particularly emergency, expenditures. This was decidedly the case with Adam and Ricky, whose low social capital, I contend, prevented them from two fairly basic necessities of life.

I had met Adam on a Wednesday in the end of January, and struck up a conversation with him in line the very next day while we waited for our potatoes and gravy. It was twelve degrees outside, and Adam excitedly told me that he had called a fellow in Rittman about renting an apartment that he could afford. This was exciting for both of us, as Adam just the day before had told me about his current living situation. Until about a month before, he had been living with his sort-of girlfriend—more-accurately his children’s mother—and her family in Florida. However, her family asked him to leave rather forcefully. Securing a ride to Ohio, of all places, Adam was dropped off in Rittman with almost no knowledge of the area. He walked the sixteen miles to Wooster and has since been living with the homeless population on US 30.

This was the first time I had heard of Rittman, so I asked Adam where it was. He told me that it was at least 10 miles away, but that he had his bike. Given that I was barely willing to walk the two blocks to my car in the cold, I insisted that Adam let me take him to look at the apartment. I had a car, and didn’t mind driving especially because I hoped

he might consent to an interview.⁵ The apartment was everything he wanted; that is to say, warmer and safer than his tent, and he could afford the monthly rent. Unfortunately, he did not have the 200 dollars for a security deposit, and he remarked that he did not know anyone who would loan him the cash. It is hard to say if he could have definitely secured 200 dollars had he developed better friendships at the program, but I think a number of equivocations would have to be made to deny the following: first, if he had developed friendships, he could have at least secured some money based on a loan and at least offset whatever other austerity he would have to go through to make his assistance check cover the difference and second, he seemed to feel that the deciding factor in his inability to produce the deposit was the absence of friends, or social capital, in his life.

Unfortunately, I did not learn about Wayne Metro, which provides a service intended for precisely this problem, until perhaps a month later and I have not seen Adam since. It is my suspicion that he still lives with the homeless community, though I am unable to confirm. It also became quite clear during a discussion of Wayne Metro during one breakfast that its services were known and utilized so much that had Adam mentioned his predicament to any one of The Gossips or The Misfits that they would have referred him to Metro's deposit loan program.

Ricky demonstrates another kind of failure to build and spend social capital. His problems are numerous and known by many, especially The Gossips, and yet he receives almost no poverty attenuation as a result of friendship. First, Ricky is homeless. He lies about sleeping in a tent frequently, saying that he lives with his sister. That's at least what

⁵ I recall thinking that I had built social capital with Adam by giving him a ride. Once in the car and on our way, I asked if he would mind if I asked him some interview questions. After making sure he understood that he could say no and I would still drive him to Rittman, he consented both verbally and by accepting and reading the consent form provided.

he told me initially, though I had not asked him where he lived. Later on in participant observation he let it slip that he sleeps with the homeless community on US 30. Rose knew this all along and in fact told me on my first day at breakfast that Ricky lied to everyone about having a home. When he mentioned sleeping in a tent about a month later, Rose winked at me before facetiously asking “Oh, Ricky, I thought you live with your sister?”

Ricky is certainly unemployed, though this too he lies about. He told me, and probably most others, that he drives for a cab service in Wooster. Jeff told me once that this is flatly a lie, and everyone at the table agreed. I have never known Jeff to engage in baseless gossip, and given Ricky’s penchant for lying about how well he is doing I am not the least skeptical that Ricky is unemployed. Apart from this, Ricky went out of his way to tell me how frequently he eats out, and told me several times that he only eats at the breakfast program for the company. In short, he habitually distances himself from the people at the program and from his own need.

This distance cost him dearly when one morning in February Ricky suffered some kind of medical ailment. It was unclear to me at the time what he suffered from, but he was clearly in a lot of pain. He did mention that he had been hospitalized and catheterized the night before. It was this morning that he opened up to Homer and Rose about living in a tent, and though he did not recant his employment, he noted that he was out of money until the end of the month. Ricky needed to come up with something like 100 dollars to cover a medical prescription, and he was desperate. Homer and Rose sympathized, perhaps flatly, with Ricky, but pretended to not pick up on his implicit request for money. Their conversation read as though Ricky wanted Homer to offer, but

was too proud to ask. Homer and Rose's deaf ear was markedly different from Rose's response to Jeff's cable bill—which, though was significantly less money, was not serious enough to cause physical, debilitating pain. Ricky could barely stand upright, but he walked out of breakfast with nothing from the two. I have not seen him speak with Homer since.

Both Adam and Ricky have low social capital, and in both cases it seemed to be the deciding factor (perhaps especially in their own mind) in why they did not receive something necessary such as housing or medical help. Their poverty attenuation is low, significantly lower than that of say Scott, Jeff, Jerry or Clint. But as mentioned previously, there is something entirely different about Adam's low social capital and Ricky's low social capital. Specifically, it seems that while Adam may have the potential to make friends soon, as he did just move to the area, Ricky's social capital is suppressed by a kind of psychological roadblock produced by shame for needing help. Further, this appears to be an issue for a number of other recipients.

Psychological Affects and Low Social Capital: Self-Hating Poverty

Not all who have low social capital suffer from what I am about to describe. Some, like Adam, seem to have no issue accepting minor help, except that no one is offering. Ricky and Zac present a very different take on attitudes towards assistance. As mentioned, Ricky will accept help so long as he can deny that he needs it. He will eat a free meal with you, but only if he can convince you that he paid for one yesterday. I assume that at some level this is why he does not sit with his friends, but at a nearby table. He probably knows that they consider him a liar. Zac on the other hand will not even accept the meal (though I did once notice him grabbing a bagel), for fear that he will be perceived as a beggar.

Both frequently disparage other recipients for begging, or being lazy. Ricky speaks out against the unemployed and homeless more than I have heard from anyone else at the program, and is only second in disparaging drunks to Rose and Homer. Zac is similar in this regard, though less descript. Ricky mentions specific people at the program who are lazy and undeserving, and would never implicate his friends (however loose their friendship). Zac seems to despise almost everyone, apart from Matilde or Justin, for needing to eat at Trinity. His language is completely indiscriminate in that those who accept the meal are tantamount to beggars, and that he would never join them. Apparently this excludes the free coffee and bagel tray. Though, I could imagine why someone homeless like himself, particularly in the winter, would be interested in spending time anywhere indoors. Zac is one of many breakfast goers who stay at the breakfast program until it closes and the library opens, and many of these recipients even cite needing a warm place to be as the primary reason for coming to breakfast.

It is clear that this self-hate of neediness builds low social capital. Zac is unwilling to interact with most people. Ricky, on the other hand, just does an excellent job of telling people that he is not like them and generally closing himself off. In at least the case of Ricky, the relationship between low social capital and self-hate seems to be reinforcing. When after the minimal social capital couldn't secure the act of friendship he needed from Homer, Ricky sunk deeper into reclusiveness. I would not be surprised if Ricky now feels even less secure in attaching himself to others at the program; he has not spoken to Homer or Rose in my presence since the incident.

Concluding Thoughts on Low Social Capital

Social capital is perhaps most pronounced in its absence, and in this chapter I highlighted a number of instances in which this was the case. The stories in this chapter conflict me in a number of ways; first, while it is encouraging to see such absolute congruity with my theory, it is depressing to have to meticulously detail how difficult the lives of people I know are. I like Adam, and it pains me to see that his dearth of social capital was instrumental in his failure to secure housing. Further, many of those who have low social capital are frequent attendees of the program. There is of course a bias here in that I am more likely to develop a fuller narrative of those who I see more frequently, and therefore those who attend more, but it is mostly an issue with a central premise of this study: these programs do not necessarily encourage individuals to build and spend social capital, or at least not in all cases. The implications of this will be further discussed in the final chapter.

A big problem is that a lot of those theories don't really apply to anyone living in poverty. Your world crumbles and you just do what you can to keep it in your hands. It sucks. I used to live in a van when I was a kid. Showering at campgrounds is weird... like, it felt like an adventure to me because I was a kid, but then I looked at my mom and could see there was nothing fun about it.

Adrian S.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The simplest of this study's goals has been achieved. Those who build and social capital while attending the Trinity breakfast program experience poverty categorically better than those who do not build and spend social capital in many important ways. Typically, those who build and spend social capital at Trinity have more access to loans, have better knowledge of area services, have better knowledge of options available in the market, and feel more secure in developing further friendships and asking for help when in dire need. Conversely, those who do not build social capital receive little to none of these benefits, and some are particularly susceptible to feeling completely insecure with building friendships and asking for help. It would be hard to make a case that the broad affects of this relationship cannot be externalized to say that those who build and spend social capital, extraneous to Trinity, experience poverty better than those who do not.

The most important conclusion to draw from this relationship is that, for many, the meal served at Trinity provides utility extending beyond a meal. This is an important consideration in the debate surrounding the supremacy of cash benefits for the poor. However, this study is not capable of making the argument that a meal program provides *more* utility than a cash stipend. This research can simply propose that focusing on only

providing a cash stipend may be crippling to the poor in many important ways, based on the hidden utility of eating a meal together and building social capital. On this argument I have prepared four points that should, in their conclusions, provide some synthesis on the importance of cash and the importance of social capital.

Social Capital as Simulated Wealth

First, cash is important. I concede even that cash has much higher utility than the food provided at Trinity. Further, one of the most significant benefits of social capital found in this study, the ability to secure loans, could only exist in the presence of cash. This is not, however, an indictment of focusing on social capital, but a defense. For however important cash is, it appears that social capital enhances its utility through the development of informal credit markets. Whereas most recipients have an income based on assistance checks and no savings, those with low social capital find it impossible to cover one time, emergency expenditures, or simple mismanagement. However, those who do build social capital have a kind of simulated wealth in that they can borrow against checks yet to come in the case of emergencies with no interest. For some with greater social capital, this can even take the form of gifts.

This does, however, provide some evidence that social capital is less important in a group with no cash to loan. Lo and behold, loans require the existence of *any* economic capital, and no amount of social capital can make up for that. Were this the only benefit of social capital found in this study, it would be a truly trenchant critique. Luckily, this is not the case. Further, it should be noted that nowhere have I advocated for ending social assistance checks. If anything, I have demonstrated the importance of cash assistance by noting in which conditions cash is especially effective in attenuating poverty. That is, cash

does a *better* job of attenuating poverty for individuals with social capital. As such, Adam's assistance check could not cover his housing needs whereas it might have for others who could borrow against theirs.

Comparing Individuals

It seems that comparing sets of individuals directly may best highlight this trend. Adam and Smiley are similar in many important ways: both are unemployed, both receive income through an assistance check, some of which goes to paternity care, and both have dealt with housing insecurity. However, Smiley secured housing while Adam is still homeless. It may be the case that Smiley is more diligent in pursuit of living arrangements, but I think there are several flaws with that theory. First, Adam would have rented the apartment if he could have secured a loan to cover or partially cover the deposit. The deposit was 200 dollars, and he could have paid it back incrementally using his assistance check. Smiley once received a loan for 200 dollars from Homer and Rose based on social capital he had built with them. Further, he uses the services of Wayne Metro, something it appears Adam did not learn about but could have had he mentioned his housing concerns to anyone at breakfast.

Second, Ricky and Scott provide another interesting comparison. Both are unemployed and suffer from depressingly low self-efficacy, though both, based on cognitive abilities and likability, appear to be employable. Scott is a possible exception based on his battles with alcoholism, but ironically it appears that he, not Ricky, is more likely to soon find employment. Scott, with the encouragement and suggestions of Homer, Rose and many others of *The Gossips*, is actively seeking work. Ricky appears to not be seeking work. I should note some obvious biases in these observations: first, as

discussed, Ricky lies about having a job in the first place. If he *is* seeking work, it is unlikely that he would tell any of his friends, let alone me. However, it certainly is the case that he receives no encouragement or suggestions of where to look from friends at the program.

Inability to Build Social Capital

It may simply be the case that some people are incapable of building social capital, or at the very least experience significant aversion to it. I am not sure that any number of free meal programs would encourage Ricky to build and spend social capital. However, is it not the same case with the free market's inability to allow all people to build and spend economic capital? At the very least, providing a space to encourage individuals to build and spend social capital increases the opportunity to do so. Many people convert that opportunity into success. And, as discussed earlier, I am not advocating for the removal of assistance checks. Even if Ricky cannot benefit beyond the meal in the development of social, he is certainly no worse off by its provision.

Looking into individuals' aversion to building and spending social capital should demand the attention of other social sciences, notably sociology and psychology. Given that seeking the help and consort of friends towards poverty attenuation appears to be a self-interested, rational act, it would be beneficial to examine why certain individuals choose not to or may be unable to. I think it likely, however, that for many it is impossible to overcome such distrust, notions of self-reliance and fear of co-dependence. This is easily the greatest concern in relying on social capital to attenuate poverty, and ensures that social capital cannot be *the* platform of anti-poverty policy.

However, some mechanisms of poverty attenuation require such a low threshold

that genuinely any level of social capital will suffice. Most who manage to cross the threshold of the Trinity breakfast program are immediately given access to the knowledge of other services in the area, such as other meal programs and the community of homeless on US 30. A check in the absence of social interaction could never offer such services.

Social Capital Cannot Do Everything

As important as social capital appears to be, each previous conclusion demonstrates that it cannot do everything on its own. Other kinds of assistance, cash among them, are crucial. Jerry has high social capital, receives ample social security, and yet faces daily challenges getting to town, particularly in the winter months. Further, his living arrangements are in near constant flux given that he depends on his niece and her boyfriend for support. Jerry's friends consider what his niece does tantamount to abuse. And, as much as his story explains why cash does not do enough (in fact, his cash subsidy encourages his niece to continue the relationship), it is clear that social capital for Jerry has done little to improve drastically the instability in his life. Here there may be an error in coding: Jerry is very popular, and this surface recognition and respect from nearly everyone at the program may have been conflated unfairly with 'social capital'.

Either way, it is true that Jerry at least has friends watching over his conditions in case they get worse. What's more, he seems happy. Given his mental retardation it's difficult to tell if constantly moving and needing to walk to Wooster daily is worth living with his niece; at the very least, he never jumps at his friends' suggestions that he seek housing in Wooster. So, perhaps in this case social capital functions as a 'less-worse' solution in the absence of programs better intended to help Jerry. At the very least it is conceivable that in social capital absence Jerry would be even less secure. Research should

be put towards what services are *not* provided or simulated by social capital in the pursuit of poverty attenuation.

Comments on Methodological Strengths and Validity

It should be noted that participant observation, at least in my mind, provided an impeccable methodological strategy for uncovering what other studies of social capital have missed. While Anglin, Bell, Isserman and his colleagues would unequivocally agree that social capital is important in the lives of the poor, not one of their studies was poised to explain the day-to-day poverty attenuation provided by social capital. Isserman and his coauthors perhaps come closest in noting through large-scale quantitative analysis that communities with social capital tend to have the most secure inhabitants; I believe the explanation for *why* Isserman and company found this to be true comes from my study. Participant observation allowed for explicit examination of how those poor who have social capital are more stable than those who do not, and therefore why communities with high levels are also more stable. Communities with high social capital must have, in turn, a greater number of citizens with social capital, too, for who else but citizens attend the civic institutions, religious organizations and so on? Thus, these communities probably have a greater number of citizens who benefit from the specific mechanisms of poverty attenuation I have provided here.

Anglin may be sorely chagrined to consider that my study also provides evidence for why her conception of social capital's importance is relatively ineffectual: she is so terribly concerned with the poor's ability to organize and mobilize in the pursuit of their own economic interests (or 'self-determination' as she so frequently says) that she ignores that many of the poor, by way of social capital, find economic stability and truthful

fulfillment and happiness without ‘determining’ their lives through grassroots organizing. Perhaps not so surprisingly, that the poor with the most social capital at the program were also the most likely to feel positively about themselves, for example Rose, Homer and Jerry, while those who are clearly experiencing some manner of depression tend to have low social capital, such as Ricky and Zac. What Anglin has missed is that it has relatively little to do with the mobilization of social capital towards restructuring fundamentally economic structures; Homer does not care about that. Instead, self-determination at the breakfast program had everything to do with having coffee with a friend and knowing she would help you out when in need.

There are many things this study is unable to provide, however, and some of them are indeed of great importance. For all the emphasis I have placed on poverty attenuation by simulating wealth, this study in no way can compare explicitly the poverty attenuation in dollars experienced by breakfast recipients in relation to what utility they lose by receiving a meal rather than a cash stipend. That is to say, I assume that the utility of credit markets exceeds the utility that would be provided by converting the meal offered at Trinity to a cash stipend. Were this project extended, perhaps over a number of years, I would attempt to gather explicit dollar figures of loans over time for specific individuals and compared it to the dollar figures they would have received by converting the meal to a cash stipend.

But even this would fall short of answering the question: there’s no indication that the increased *income* of the converted cash stipend would match the utility of the simulated *wealth* provided by social capital. And, perhaps if we truly want to hold income and wealth as two wholly distinct kinds of economic capital, there is no way to compare

the utility of social capital built by a meal and the utility of converting that meal into a stipend besides what this study has already provided: wealth is important to stability, and cash stipends as income cannot always provide in the same way that social capital can in building or simulating wealth for the poor.

Concluding Thoughts

I promised to demonstrate that social capital matters in the lives of the poor, and here I believe I have wholly succeeded. And, while I *did* say that I wanted to critique the supreme utility of cash, it would be inappropriate to not clarify that cash, too, is critical. Many build social capital by loaning cash; many spend social capital because they *need* cash. So, score one for neo-liberalism: cash is better for the poor than food alone. But cash is better still when introduced to an individual with social capital, whether that means she borrows against it or loans it out. Further, social capital offers ways to attenuate poverty that a check could not hope to offer: knowledge of markets and services, as well as feeling more secure and more able to turn to friends for help. So here I return to the perhaps banal phraseology of my introduction: a meal is never *just* a meal. It is an opportunity to make friends and jokes, to share stories and songs, to offer commiseration and complaints, to build a home and invite others to it. Were this not enough, it also offers the opportunity for genuine economic development by way of building social capital.

Unfortunately, this feel-good end must shift back to a matter of policy: converting to the negative income tax, or other sorts of exclusively cash subsidies for the poor would be detrimental to their economic security. Governments must continue, as they have for well over a century, to support private non-profit organizations in the social services sector. It is not a question of regulating behavior of the poor, but investing in

social gathering. Private charity cannot support every church breakfast program, every civic lunch service; look no further than to 1996 Welfare reform' inclusion of Charitable Choice—government policy and social capital are irrevocably linked. Our continued financial support of non-profits in the social services are demanded to continue to provide crucial opportunities for the poor to build social capital. And here the question is no longer about the supreme or lesser value of cash against a meal, but a question of why we should choose: social capital provides effective poverty attenuation for individuals irrespective of their cash assistance, and even enhances that cash assistance. Investments in social capital, or poverty attenuation not provided by a check, should remain as it is in policy, if not supplemented.

References

- Anglin, Mary K.. 2002. "Lessons from Appalachia in the 20th Century: Poverty, Power and the 'Grassroots.'" *American Anthropologist* 104 (2): 565-582.
- Bell, Shannon Elizabeth. 2009. "'There Ain't No Bond in Town Like There Used to Be': The Destruction of Social Capital in the West Virginia Coalfields." *Sociological Forum* 24 (3).
- Billings, Dwight B. and Kathleen M. Blee. 1948. *The Road to Poverty: The Making of Wealth and Hardship in Appalachia*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blank, Rebecca M. 2003. "Selecting Among Anti-Poverty Policies: Can an Economist be Both Critical and Caring?" *Review of Social Economy* 61 (4): 447-469.
- Brisson, Daniel S. and Charles L. Usher. 2005. "Bonding Social Capital in Low-Income Neighborhoods." *Family Relations* 54 (5): 644-653.
- Chaves, Mark. 1999. "Religious Congregations and Welfare Reform: Who Will Take Advantage of 'Charitable Choice'?" *American Sociological Review* 64 (2): 836-846.
- Claessens, Stijn. 2006. "Access to Financial Services: A Review of the Issues and Public Policy Objectives." *World Bank Research Observer* 21 (2): 207-240.
- Currie, Janet and Firouz Gahvari. 2008. "Transfers in Cash and In-Kind: Theory Meets the Data." *Journal of Economic Literature* 46 (2): 333-83.
- Edin, Kathryn and Laura Lein. 1997. *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Edin, Kathryn and Laura Lein. 1998. "The Private Safety Net: The Role of Charitable Organizations in the Lives of the Poor." *Housing Policy Debate* 9 (4): 541-573.
- Friedman, Milton and Rose Friedman. 1980. *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement*. New York: Harcourt, Inc.
- Gans, Herbert. 1999. "Participant Observation in the Era of 'Ethnography'." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28 (5): 540-548.

- Gans, Herbert. 1972. "The Positive Functions of Poverty." *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (2): 275-89.
- Gans, Herbert. 1995. *The War Against the Poor*. New York: BasicBooks.
- Glasser, Irene. 1988. *More Than Bread: Ethnography of the Soup Kitchen*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.
- Headey, Bruce. 2008. "Poverty is Low Consumption and Low Wealth, Not Just Low Income." *Social Indicators Research* 89 (1): 23-39.
- Henly, J.. 2002. Informal Support Networks and the Maintenance of Low-Wage Jobs. In F. Munger (Ed.). *Laboring Below the Line: The New Ethnography of Poverty, Low-Wage Work, and Survival in the Global Economy*. 179-203. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Isserman, Andrew M., Edward Feser and Drake E. Warren. 2009. "Why Some Rural Places Prosper and Some Do Not." *International Regional Science Review* 32: 300-42.
- Lipsky, Michael and Steven Rathgeb Smith. 1990. "Non-Profit Organizations, Government, And the Welfare State."
- Mencken, F. Carson. 1997. "Regional Differences in Socioeconomic Well-Being in Appalachia." *Sociological Focus* 30 (1): 79-97.
- Pearson, A. Fiona. 2007. "The New Welfare Trap: Case Managers, College Education, and TANF Policy." *Gender and Society* 21 (5): 723-748.
- Perrow, Charles. 1974. *Analysis of Goals in Complex Organizations: A Market Analogy*. In Yeheskel Hasenfeld and Richard English (Ed.). *Human Service Organizations*. 214-29. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Portes, Alejandro. 2000. "The Two Meanings of Social Capital." *Sociological Forum* 15 (1): 1-12.
- Ryan, Rebecca M. and Ariel Kalil. 2009. "Low-Income Mothers' Private Safety Nets and Children's Socioemotional Wellbeing." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 71: 278-297.

- Rose, Roderick A., Susan L. Parish and Joan P. Yoo. 2009. "Measuring Material Hardship among the US Population of Women with Disabilities Using Latent Class Analysis." *Social Indicators Research*. 94: 391-415.
- Salamon, Lester M. 1986. "Government and the Voluntary Sector in an Era of Retrenchment: The American Experience." *Journal of Public Policy* 6 (1): 1-19.
- Salamon, Lester M. 1995. *Partners in Public Service: Government-Nonprofit Relations in the Modern Welfare State*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Simon, Herbert. 1972. "Theories of Bounded Rationality." In *Human Problem Solving*. North-Holland Publishing Company.
- Stevens, Rosemary. 1982. "'A Poor Sort of Memory': Voluntary Hospitals and Government Before the Depression." *The Milbank Fund Quarterly/Health and Society* 60 (4): 551-584
- Warner, Amos Griswold and George Elliott Howard. 1984. *American Charities*. New York: Thomas Y Crowell & Co.