

## Searching for the relational mechanisms behind poverty and inequality

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The literature on poverty has increasingly highlighted the importance of sociability patterns and social networks for the understanding of life conditions. The different patterns of social connections were already central in Wilson's classical formulations (1987) about the relational effects of the concentration of poverty and in Bourdieu's (1986) version of social capital to allow the understanding of both the "large" and the "small miseries" (Bourdieu, 2007 [1993]). More recently, these elements have been considered central in more formal analysis departing from intentional understandings of social capital (Lin, 1999a and b; Burt, 2004), but also in studies that consider non-intentionality in tie formation and social interaction (Briggs, 2001 and 2003; Small, 2009).

The research in which this article is embedded focuses on precisely this issue, contributing to a better understanding of the role of social networks and sociability in poverty conditions, considering different housing and segregation situations (Marques, 2010a; 2010b and at press)<sup>1</sup>. Following the relational sociology perspective, the networks are considered as the relation fabric constructed continuously by the individuals in their daily practices in several simultaneous settings. Although in constant change, these networks constitute mid-size structures that mediate the access individuals have to material and immaterial goods, services, through different types of social exchanges. These networks may be mobilized differently by the individuals in different situations. Their effects over life conditions, welfare and deprivation situations are, therefore, ambivalent, suggesting that research strategies that depart from normative understandings of the networks will not be able to fully grasp their effect.

Considering this understanding of the networks, I have combined several methods including qualitative and quantitative techniques (Wilson, 2002 and Small, at

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<sup>1</sup> The research was conducted in two phases, the first in 2007 in São Paulo and the second in 2009 in Salvador. The research team included, besides myself, Renata Bichir, Encá Moya, Miranda Zoppi and Graziela Castello. I am indebted to all of them for their engagement in the field and for their analytical insights. Regardless of their intense participation in the research, all the analyses included in this article are my own, except when otherwise stated.

press) to study the relational patterns of 362 individuals in poverty and 30 middle-class individuals in two major Brazilian metropolises – São Paulo and Salvador. These individuals (209 in São Paulo and 153 in Salvador) live in 12 neighborhoods (7 in São Paulo and 5 in Salvador), characterized by different housing and segregation situations and chosen intentionally considering their characteristics. In each of the cities, I first explored their sociability patterns using network analysis tools and later returned to 40 of them for the qualitative part of the research.

This article is devoted to a specific part of this analytical task – unpacking the relational mechanisms that help explain both network formation and network mobilization in the individuals' daily lives. This is important because we have been learning a great deal about the importance of networks, but still know little about how their effect takes place. The focus on mechanisms aims at uncovering the social regularities that lie behind the networks and explain their different characteristics and effects among social groups.

The article is divided into four sections, not counting this introduction. In the first section, I briefly review the literature on the topic, to establish the analytical point of departure of the research. In the second section, I summarize the main results of the research concerning the networks, the sociability patterns and their association with poverty and living conditions. In the third section, I present the mechanisms, illustrating them with situations found in the field during the qualitative part of the research. At the end, the last section summarizes the main findings and discusses their importance to the explanation of the reproduction of poverty and of social inequalities in our cities.

### **1. Networks, sociability and social mechanisms**

The relationships between poverty, spatial segregation and networks are too complex to be explored in depth in this short section. At the same time, each of these elements has been studied by long and rich traditions. But it is important to outline the most pivotal connections between them, creating the conceptual bridges that organize the research. This section is devoted to this task.

The general idea is relatively simple and involves two steps, starting from the association between segregation and poverty. It is widely known that the spatial concentration of poverty undermines living conditions, hampers social mobility and reduces the sense of belonging individuals have to collectivities (Wilson, 1987; Jargowsky, 1997; Mustered et al. 2006). This happens because of several associated

reasons. Firstly, segregation reduces the access to goods and services, at least in the large cities of the Global South where services are not universalized. But segregation also (and maybe more importantly) restricts social contacts among social groups, making the sociability of the poor even more homophilic than it used to be some decades ago (Wilson, 1987). It also lowers the access of the poor to material elements associated with opportunities such as better jobs and income, and to immaterial aspects such as cultural repertoires and ways of life. In its more stable forms, the combination of poverty with segregation is associated with territorial stigmatization and the dissolution of place, in the conformation of the 'hyper ghettos' (Wacquant, 2008; Ayuero, 1999; Ayuero and Swiston, 2009).

For some others (Sampson and Raudenbush, 1997), all this would lead to the formation of the so-called neighborhood effects, although these effects belong to the realm of strict empirical regularities and do not consider the social processes that might cause these regularities, leading to an environmental understanding of social contexts (Sampson and Morenoff, 1997). I believe that it is more profitable analytically to treat segregation as one of the facets of poverty, understood as multidimensional (Mingione, 1996), and search for the social processes and mechanisms associated with segregation that contribute to the reproduction of inequalities and poverty.

But a second element must be added. Since we are not speaking about ghettos in the strict sense of the term (Marcuse, 1997), social ties may (and effectively do) connect persons, families and groups differently over the boundaries of segregated territories, potentially reducing the effects of concentration and homogeneity in space. In the most local sense, this process is associated with ties inside the neighborhood and the family and their role in the dissemination of the resources of poverty (De La Rocha, 2001), as well as with the role of informal ties in different issues such as survival strategies and housing (Mingione, 1994; Pamuk, 2000). But those tend to be marked by high degrees of homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), and consequently the relationships with non-primary contacts and people from outside of the communities tend to be more important to social mobility and the reduction of poverty (Briggs, 2003; Small, 2004), enabling, at the same time, some bridging and weaving (Briggs, 2003 and 2005; Small, 2004). In this sense, the joint study of segregation and social networks becomes imperative to the understanding of poverty.

However, this task will not be achieved if networks are considered aprioristically, simply searching for bridging ties, classifying them normatively and considering the individuals as network-seeking rational actors. This leads to

instrumental and static interpretations of relational patterns, missing the fact that the same social connections may bond or bridge for different persons and social groups, and even for the same persons in different situations (Blokland and Savage, 2008). Ambivalence is intrinsic to social relationships and studies must leave room to that in their explanations and narratives. Additionally, the ties (their presence, strength and content) are in continuous change, and a large proportion of them have been created with no purpose at all (Small, 2009). To avoid instrumental understandings of relations, we have to skip normative assumptions about networks, as well as reject environmental understandings of social contexts. To do so, the networks that bind a certain social situation must be studied as they are, associating their consequences (or correlates, considering the multiple causality chains present in each situation) without a priori considerations. Finally, after researching the networks, we must understand how they are mobilized by people in their daily lives, since our representations of social networks are static reproductions of the very dynamic relational settings that structure social contexts.

In what concerns poverty and social conditions, therefore, both social networks and spatial segregation are mid-level structures (in continuous change) that mediate the access individuals have to other relational settings and to society, more broadly speaking. These structures incorporate social mechanisms (respectively relational and environmental mechanisms) in the sense given to the term by Tilly (201 and 2005). Mechanism in this case does not denote something concrete present ontologically in the networks or in the territory, but a place in our explanations (Mahoney, 2001). Mechanisms are causal regularities observed in the social processes and postulated by the analyst as causes in her theories. The construction of a mechanism-based explanation intends to allow us to go beyond the simple correlation of processes or attributes (Mahoney, 2001 and Tilly, 2005).

Two last points should be stressed before presenting the research. First, I analyze personal networks, and not community networks, or individual ego-centered networks. Community or whole networks may be spatially or thematically constituted, and are the relational environments that surround social actors within a given context, occurrence or process. This study, taking a different approach, looks at the networks of individuals considering their sociability as the topic or theme upon which the interview questions are to be based. However, these personal networks are not limited to the ego-centered networks of individuals (or egonets) as in many other studies in the field. Ego-centered networks include only the individual's primary contacts and the

ties some of these maintain. The decision to concentrate on whole personal networks departs from the idea that an important portion of the sociability that influences poverty and life conditions occurs at greater distances from the ego than her immediate surroundings.

Finally, it is also important to add that in terms of causality, I consider that both networks and social conditions (including poverty) are constructed (and reconstructed continuously) through the individuals' life trajectories, leading to certain configurations. The association between networks and social attributes, therefore, does not allow us to talk about direct causes, although their mutual influence dynamically through time might be pictured as multiple causality. The emphasis on mechanisms allows us to consider fully these multiple causalities and at the same time go beyond the description of the attributes and the trajectories of the individuals.

## **2. The research and previous findings**

The study surveyed the personal networks of 362 individuals living under conditions of poverty, as well as of thirty middle-class individuals, in the interests of establishing some standard of comparison. In order to explore the effects of spatial segregation on these personal networks, 30 networks were mapped at each of the 12 study sites (seven in São Paulo and five in Salvador). According to previous studies on poverty in the two cities, these locations varied greatly in terms of distance from the center, degree of consolidation, patterns of construction and level of state intervention (CEM/SAS, 2003 and Carvalho & Pereira, 2006 and Carvalho et al., 2004). São Paulo and Salvador were chosen because they present very different characteristics in terms of job market, social structure, poverty profile and patterns of segregation (Gonçalves & Saraiva, 2007), despite both being large metropolises of nationwide – and, in the case of São Paulo, international – importance.

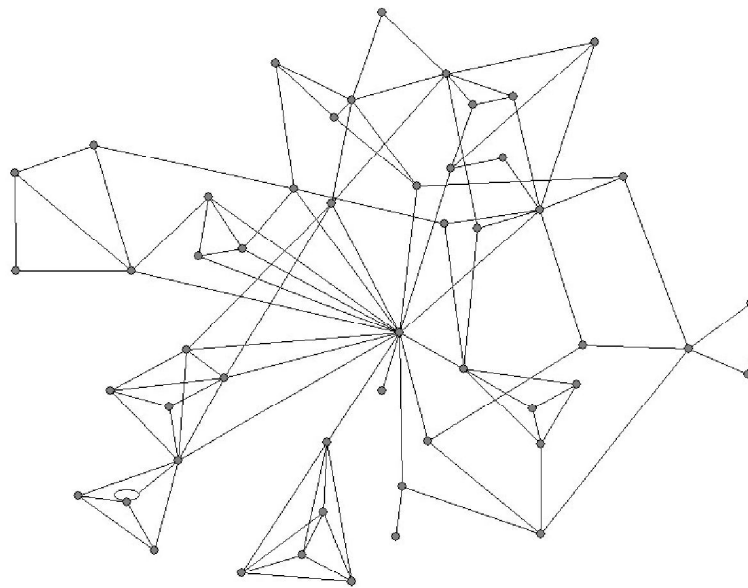
The interviews used a semi-open questionnaire and a name generator and interviewees were selected at random during visits to the study locations, made both on weekdays and at weekends. The middle-class participants were selected from a wide spectrum, with the sole aim of serving as a standard of comparison in the analysis of the other networks. This data was handled using social network analysis tools and statistical analyses. The next step was to choose forty individuals (twenty per city) as subjects for the qualitative part of the study, combining types of network, locale and interviewee characteristics. The present article will explore, above all, this qualitative information.

In what follows I will summarize the main quantitative results in order to better situate the reader in relation to the discussion of the mechanisms.

First of all, when compared with the middle-class networks, the personal networks of the poor individuals tended to be smaller, more local and less varied in terms of sociability. Inter-relations between different social and income groups practically do not exist. This is one of the core characteristics of the reproduction of poverty and social inequality, but does not derive from the networks themselves, but rather represents a relational facet of Brazilian social structure, marked by strong hierarquical features.

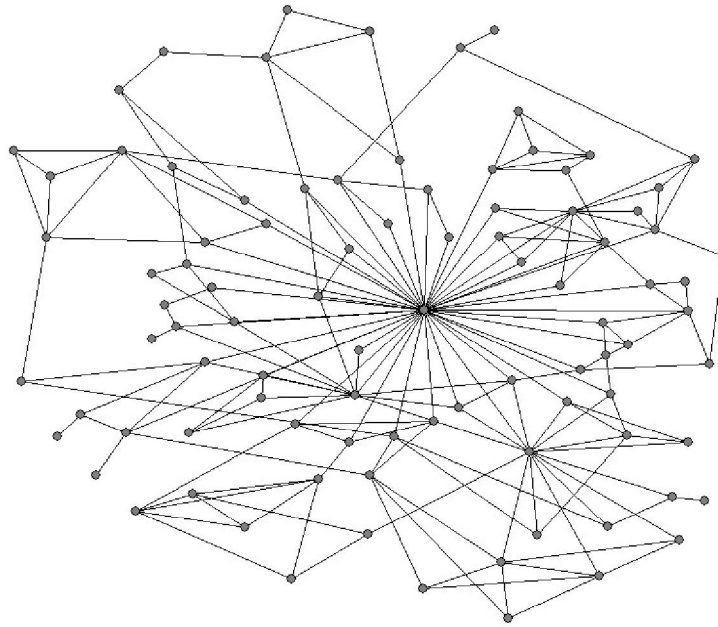
By way of illustration, the following sociograms present the networks of two women, one poor and the other middle-class, that serve as representative examples of each group. As we can see, the first network is smaller, simpler, less clustered and more ego-centered than the second.

**FIGURE 1 – Average Sociogram of a Poor Individual (woman in São Paulo)**



Source: Developed by the author from material collated in the field.

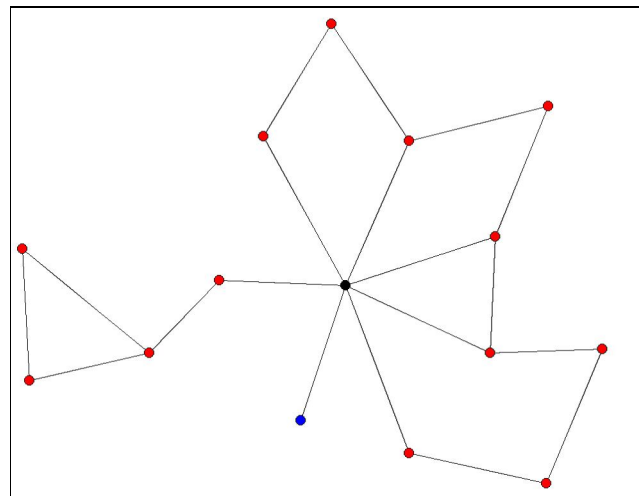
**FIGURE 2 – Average Sociogram of a Middle-class Individual (woman in São Paulo)**



Source: Developed by the author from material collated in the field.

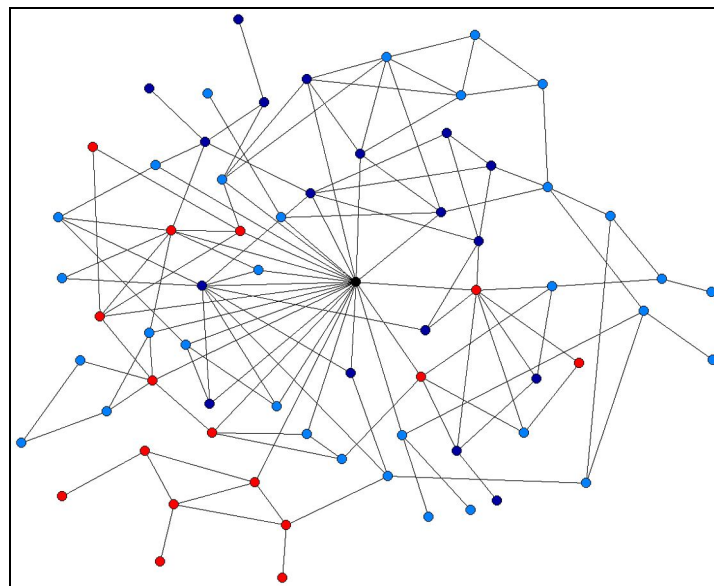
In addition to major differences between the group averages, networks also varied considerably within each group. The following sociograms illustrate the networks of two poor individuals that reveal widely different relational patterns. The symbology of the nodes shows the spheres of sociability in which the ego meets with each individual member of the network. The first sociogram corresponds to a very limited, simply-structured network almost entirely restricted to the egonet, while the second is far larger and more complex. Observation of the different colors of the nodes also indicates a lower degree of variability among spheres of sociability in the first network, which is highly family-concentrated, while in the second relations are more widely dispersed across the neighborhood, friendships and family.

**FIGURE 3 – Sociogram of a Poor Individual with a small network (woman in Salvador**



Source: Developed by the author from material collated in the field.  
Legend: Ego in black, family in red, neighborhood in blue, work in green, church in yellow, studies in grey, leisure in pink, friendship in light blue, association in white and other spheres in orange

**FIGURE 4 – Sociogram of a Poor Individual with a large network (man in Salvador**



Source: Developed by the author from material collated in the field.  
Legend: Ego in black, family in red, neighborhood in blue, work in green, church in yellow, studies in grey, leisure in pink, friendship in light blue, association in white and other spheres in orange

The networks are influenced by socio-economic attributes and processes such as sex, age, educational level, income, migration, church membership or association



and segregation itself, albeit in an indirect and combined manner. The networks and the sociability vary, for example, along the life cycle (tending to be smaller and less diverse for the elderly), but also vary according to gender (more concentrated on friends for men and church and neighbors for women) and employment status (more varied among the employed, especially outside the place of residence). So the effects of all those attributes over the network of an old man who works outside the place of residence will be combined in a complex way, creating difficulties (and not being very profitable analytically) to untangle each single effect.<sup>2</sup> The analysis of their combined effects tends to be more profitable for the understanding of poverty reproduction, since these tend to involve circularities that perpetuate social situations and relationships and that reproduce inequalities in a way that is persistent but not necessarily categorical in Tilly's sense of the word (2005).

Considering the variability encountered among these networks, I developed two basic typologies – of the networks and of the patterns of sociability. The findings would suggest that, while the networks of poor individuals are generally smaller, more local and less varied than those of their middle-class counterparts, they nonetheless vary greatly amongst themselves. If, on one hand, many of these networks present patterns of sociability both highly local and based on primary ties (of family, neighborhood and friendship), a considerable portion also presents a less local sociability, largely generated within organizational or institutional environments (work, church, associations). So, even among the poor we can find ampler relational patterns, with varied sociability and potentially lower homophily.

Later analysis specified the impacts the networks had on social and economic conditions. It became clear that employment, including jobs with greater levels of protection, and the absence of social precariousness, tend to be positively influenced by less local and less primary patterns of sociability. In addition, alongside the traditional variables such as levels of schooling, age and income, networks and sociability help to explain individual revenues. The results of multivariate analysis revealed the significance of such factors as household size and educational level. In addition, however, three other network variables associated with networks also showed themselves to be relevant, namely: 1) the type of network and sociability (average, varied networks with not so local and less primary sociability); 2) network size; and 3) variability of sociability. Items 2 and 3 appeared significant in interactions with stable

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<sup>2</sup> I opted not to present this pattern in this article, preferring to refer all those interested to Marques (at press).

incomes and segregation. The larger effect, however, was of average-sized networks with less local or primary sociability, that had strong positive effects on income (Marques, at press). In the case of some segregated individuals, this effect is strengthened by the presence of varied sociability, which helps compensate the social isolation produced by segregation.

Though very important, these results do not tell us much about the individual's daily mobilization of his/her network. Information drawn from the interviews would suggest that the assistance that mediates access to markets and social support can be grouped according to an overlap between trust, cost of the assistance and type of reciprocity. Trust is considered in this research as the certainty that the rules of a relationship will be followed, whatever they be. Trust is an important content of the personalized relationships and a necessary component of the ties that carry non generalized exchanges, such as confidences. Trust tends to be specialized by theme; and an ego may trust different alters in different situations (commercial, work related, political, intimate etc). The interviews suggested that trust tends to appear more easily in homophilic relations (associated with the type of trust in case). In the more intimate situations (but only then, necessarily), trust tends to be accompanied by intimacy, which is the characteristic of a tie in which some kind of nudity (of several kinds of secrets) is present. Trust may be present in vertical, as well as in horizontal relationships, but intimacy apparently is in place only in the absence of strong hierarchical differences.<sup>3</sup>

Depending on the situation, the reciprocity and trust involved assume a range of shapes and aspects, and the exchange can be more or less personalized. On the other hand, in the specific case of returning each specific favor, the costs (economic and non economic) acquire distinct contents, often mixed with prestige, affection, expectation of retribution and money.

The question is an important one, as there is often a tenuous line between what is purely a market exchange and what constitutes exchange via social reciprocity, albeit also involving cash payments. In the first case, even though the individuals may know each other, the transaction is purely the purchase of a good or service that could just as well be procured elsewhere. An example would be hiring an acquaintance to do some plumbing work. On the other hand, we have social exchanges in the strict sense, though these may also involve payment, even between very close individuals. In this case, the money is simply one of the dimensions involved in the exchange, which is not

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Marques (at press).

generalized, but specific and personalized by the bonds of trust involved. Apparently, these cash payments constitute retributions that help reduce the cost of the favor rendered, in addition to such other factors as increased prestige and affection or pay-back for, or the promise of, assistance past or future, in the context of reciprocity. It is interesting to add that social exchanges involved money much less frequently in Salvador than in São Paulo, apparently due to the smaller access of the poor individuals to the labor markets.

On one extreme we have low-cost aids that can be exchanged within bonds of low trust and based on diffuse and impersonal solidarities. This group would include help in times of ill-health, the lending of tools and provisions, looking after someone's home while they are away, as well as the passing-on of information about services and jobs. This type of help is typically associated with ties of acquaintance, in which contact is frequent but not intense, and in which little investment is required by way of trust.

At mid-level are personalized exchanges that involve high or constant cost or effort predicated on a solid degree of trust. In this case, payment is quite common, even among people with close ties, as a way of mitigating the costs incurred. As this kind of favor is personalized, those who render them tend to be hard to replace and people with a low level of social insertion often find it difficult to rally this kind of help, thus perpetuating the reproduction of inequalities.

Lastly, we have personalized aids that entail high costs and/or high levels of trust. The most important example here is social support, which is inevitably based on trust, whether personal, professional or political. As relationships strong enough to request this kind of assistance are relatively rare, their absence could represent a significant source of vulnerability for the individual. The dynamic of this kind of help is largely circular, and individuals with more tenuous levels of social inclusion will have more difficulty securing such costly help, thus perpetuating the vicious circle of social inequalities. This is mediated by the mechanisms discernible in networks, as we shall see.

### **3. Relational mechanisms**

The information obtained through the interviews made profoundly clear the existence of causal regularities associated with the mobilization of sociability in resolving day-to-day issues, as well as in the individual's devising of strategies. Analysis of this information may help enumerate the relational mechanisms that contribute to

the production of poverty (or its mitigation) and of the effects demonstrated above. These are not regularities of the networks or of individual elements, but rather of social mechanisms in the sense discussed above, which have an impact upon the networks and their availability when it comes to individuals solving their daily problems.

The regularities observed suggest the existence of mechanisms that:

- i) influence the formation of networks and individual sociability at the same time as they;
- ii) impact social action and mediate access to opportunities.

This distinction, however, is merely analytical and, in practice, both dynamics occur concomitantly and in association over the course of an individual's life. Most of the time, the accumulateness behind these mechanisms goes some way toward setting in motion those vicious circles that lead to the persistent reproduction of inequalities, in Tilly's acceptance of the term (2005).

The literature on social stratification proposes a distinction between inequality of results and inequality of opportunities. The former concerns different living conditions, while the latter refers to the varying probabilities of individuals achieving a certain social level, given their respective social origins. Relational mechanisms interfere in both. By directly reducing access to the goods, services that promote well-being, the mechanisms contribute to the production (or reproduction) of unequal results. Additionally, since their mediation of the individual's access to opportunity structures is far from uniform, they help constitute an inequality of opportunity. As relational mechanisms generate a combined effect on these two types of inequality, I will make no distinction between them.

First I will discuss the elements involved in the transformation of networks over time, analyzing the main process of change in relational structures. Secondly, I will present the relational mechanisms that have impact on the conditions of urban life in general and on poverty in particular.

### **3.1. Changes in the networks**

The networks studied during the quantitative phase represented relatively static relational structures. This is due, in part, to the focus of the study, but also to the fact that networks were not mapped at more than one moment in time, which would have made it possible to present a temporal panel. However, the qualitative data shed some light on the changes that had occurred to these networks since our first meetings, approximately a year before the second interview. Without hoping to make a detailed

investigation of the network transformations, this section systematizes what was learned about these changes, thus dynamizing what we have discussed thus far.

Network changes can be more localized and conjunctural in nature, or more structural, associated with lifecycles or the types of relational environment to which the individual has access. These changes can either create (or destroy) relationships or change the environment in which these occur, thus contributing to the alteration of the contents of these ties. As a result, not only the sizes and structures of the networks may change, but also the types of tie and the practices of sociability may be transformed, with important consequences for social exchanges.

The most general process of network change is the life cycle of the individuals (Bidart e Lavenu, 2005). This is basically a tendency toward change of a very general character that can be counterpoised by a number of other factors, but which will also exercise its own influence upon us all. In general terms, during childhood, the individual has a relatively small network based on primary ties, starting with the family and working out through the neighborhood and family friends. Throughout adolescence, networks expand greatly, especially through the intermediation of the school environment and the neighborhood, with a heavy influx of new foci acquired through established contacts (network) and the spheres of friends and neighbors. Leaving the school environment and entering the world of work alters networks substantially, usually paring them back while also making them more heterophilic. Other important events will also alter networks, such as migrations, changes of address, marriage and separation, and parenthood, as highlighted in the literature. As individuals age, their networks tend to shrink, partly as they retire from the world of work, but also because of reduced physical mobility and cessation of former activities (Bidart e Lavenu, 2005). Consequently, networks become smaller and more concentrated upon the family, the neighborhood and friends. It is interesting to note that similar patterns were observed in ego-centered networks, at least in the case of surveys conducted in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Marques & Bichir, 2010).

Beyond these general, trend-based changes, other localized processes also have an impact. Six basic types of network transformation and building process could be identified. The first and more obvious one is associated with the death of a contact, what may have devastating effects in the access of the individual to goods and services. In one case in Salvador, the death of a godmother whose social position was way above poverty, almost disconnected the individual from his main sources of money

and social support, since she was his only connection with the rest of his family, who disapproves his way of life.

It is important to state that, except for death, the exit of a node in an network may also represent only what we call latency – in which the contacts are not cited during the interview, but did not effectively leave the network. The latency of relations, therefore, is mediated by the combination between the type and the intensity of the ties. These ties may be mobilized again later, especially in the case of family ties and strong friendships.

Secondly, networks are severely altered by geographical displacements through change of address, especially so among the poor. Depending on the physical distance of the move, this can affect even intimate and strong ties, though it works more readily upon relationships of acquaintance, which are usually more fluid. As one interviewee from a slum in São Paulo put it, these are the 'Hi there' relationships. In the case of our study, many of our interviewees lost (or gained) somewhere between 5% and 10% of their networks in a single year through the comings and goings of these more superficial contacts, especially within the neighborhood.

Evidently, migratory processes are involved in this dynamic and cause deep-set alterations, but intra-urban moves work in the same direction. In terms of the two cities studied here, migration, even if only intra-urban, was shown to have a stronger influence in São Paulo, as moves tend to be less frequent in Salvador and the neighborhoods substantially more consolidated. This type of change affects the poor much more severely than the middle-class, given their greater dependency on space in weaving their relations and the greater difficulty they face in meeting the costs of maintaining these ties, as we shall see forthwith.

A third mechanism of recurring change concerns growing heterophily among the individuals present in a relationship, normally wrought by an upgrading or downgrading of their living conditions (as cases of social mobility in the strict sense were very rare in the studied cases), generating greater social distance among individuals who were close before. In many interview cases, we could detect a distancing between the ego and a given alter in what could be characterized as Bourdieu's (2007) social space. This usually occurred due to a change in social condition or a minor geographical move that led the individual to a different social environment. In this latter situation, an ego's contact may move to another part of the same shantytown, a geographically minimal distance away, but to a part or area that has a relatively richer or poorer social composition, thus inhibiting the ego from

maintaining those contacts. The effect here is not related to the social movement of the individual in question, but to the stigma or social distinction attached to certain locations, which reflect positively or negatively upon the individual, thus boosting heterophily (even if the people in question continue to share the same characteristics) and hampering the maintenance of contacts. The drifting-apart stemmed from the awkwardness created by stigma, particularly a territorial stigma in the case of changes of residence. The presence of territorial stigmas in the sense used by Wacquant (2008) therefore has a considerable effect on the possibilities of forging and maintaining ties.

Fourthly, members can be included or excluded from networks because of conflicts or disagreements and newly acquired knowledge. Conflicts, however, do not always lead to rupture, even when quite serious. Cases were encountered in which individuals had experienced serious conflicts with the ego, but given the type and intensity of the tie involved (family or close friends, for example), returned to the network or ended up providing crucial assistance in a time of crisis. In the words of one young resident of a shantytown in São Paulo: "things may one day go back to how they were. Time heals an awful lot". These are latent cases in the terms already cited.

There were also found alterations caused by changes in organizational or relational environments, seen as the formation or nurturing of ties depends on the organizational environments in which they occur. In this sense, the networks are influenced by organizational characteristics such as being places of common interest and practices or just of attendance and generating interaction with higher or lower degrees of competition or cooperation (Small, 2009). Frequenting new environments and abandoning old ones creates or repels opportunities for contact. This is the case, for example, with switching classes at school, job moves, or joining a new congregation. Such changes affect the conjunct and tend to occur constantly. They may also render relations latent only to be reactivated later, much like in the mending of bridges after a conflict.

A sixth driver of change is not associated with the structure of the networks, but with the content of the social ties that bind the nodes together. The content of the relationships are in constant and intense process of transformation. This is not a case of ruptures, or of the construction of ties, but rather of changes in their types. Generally speaking, the interviews indicated that this dynamic is associated with the complex processes of building trust and intimacy. These processes are very similar to those discussed in such instigating fashion by Blokland (2003), who conducted

ethnographic research into how types of social action in the Weberian sense transform with changes in relationship contents.

In relation to our prime interest here, breaches of trust or a cooling of relations have an impact upon the kinds of support individuals can expect to receive from their networks. Likewise, the provision of certain types of assistance can build trust, complicity and intimacy and raise certain relationships to a whole other level. One example is when an acquaintance helps someone at a crucial time, as in a serious health crisis. The newfound confidence and intimacy this builds will help transform the type of tie the ego and the alter had prior to that event, confirming one of the mechanisms we will discuss in the following.

### 3.2. Mechanisms

The mechanisms that shape networks and mediate their mobilization can be broken down into two large groups in pursuit of clearer presentation. The first includes the causal triggers that produce a differentiation between the networks of individuals living in poverty and those of their middle-class counterparts, while the second explains much of the network variability observed among the poor.

Distinguishing between middle-class networks and those of the poor

When poor and middle-class individuals are young, there is no substantial difference between their networks and the process of growing up remains the most important operation in play up until adolescence. This indicates that it is from that point on that the mechanisms start to work intensely, triggering a widening gulf between the relational patterns of these social groups as they make the transition into adulthood. I refer here to the differentiated effects of **sociability in school life and socialization for the workplace** between these social groups, and especially of the existence of a transition toward professional networks in the case of the middle-class. It is not only a question of higher educational level per se, but of the relational effects of the middle-class spending longer periods of time in educational institutions that will have later impacts on their insertion within the workplace. Beyond the well-known lower degree of homophily in the school environment (when compared with the family or the immediate neighborhood), there is a second and even more important effect. In comparison with the middle-class, there is a relational discontinuity in socialization for the workplace among the poor. In order to better understand this issue, we shall take



a look at the changes in relations and networks that occur during the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

In general, this transition is marked by changes in the ties from local homophily and primary bonds to more external and mixed connections formed within institutional environments, for both the poor and the middle-class. School is one of the forums for the transition from certain types of more primary and local spheres (family, the neighborhood, friends) to less local and more secondary types (church, workplace, unions, associations). The school structure itself reflects this dimension, as secondary school tends to be much less homophilic (and less geographically local) than primary school.<sup>4</sup> As such, throughout the maturing process, people gradually develop the attributes of the adult world at the same time as they acquire the network patterns that go with it. For the middle-class, this occurs in slow, parallel fashion, with their place of study (and stage of life) ushering the transition along. In the case of the poor, the world of studies does not occupy similar importance, with educational careers being briefer and overlapping with events of an adulthood that commences sooner, perhaps through teenage pregnancy, an early entrance into the job market in low-skilled tasks or precocious marriage.

However, the crux of the issue would seem to me to lie in the much rarer presence of university environments, and other such spaces of gradual relational preparation for the professional world, in the work-bound socialization of the poor. It is on the university campus that the middle-class starts forming its professional networks, seen as the domain of study, third-level at least, represents a slow relational transition toward the specialized jobs market. Individuals living in poverty, even when they do complete high-school, still face considerable relational discontinuity when they emerge into the job market, as their schoolmates will be dispersed across a far broader spectrum of occupations. Socialization for the world of work, in this case, occurs in practice (and normally in the activities the individual manages to find, but did not choose), without the (lengthy) mediation of an university environment in which relationships can be forged. Nothing could be farther removed from the world of Granovetter's job-seekers (1972) - middle-class individuals with college degrees who search for high skilled jobs in specialized labor markets.

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<sup>4</sup> The larger proximity of fundamental education, when compared with high school education, is more present in São Paulo, since in Salvador the youngsters tend to study in schools closer to their places of residence, regardless of school level. These differences are associated with the diverse geographies of cities indicating that scale and distribution of equipments matter.

Professionalizing technical courses have a similar effect and can prove important to the few underprivileged individuals who get to attend them, but the result is certainly less intense due to the shorter course length and peripheral nature of the professions associated with those courses in their respective fields. This is because inside professional fields there are categorical differences between activities associated with socially constructed frontiers between degree and non-degree level occupations, such as those between doctors/dentists/nurses, on one hand, and nursing assistants and technicians on the other. This frontier is the pervasive distinction between manual and non-manual labor as internalized by the health profession, and it builds and reproduces persistent inequalities in the sense described by Tilly (2005). One of the reproductive dimensions of these inequalities in daily life resides in the operations of the networks (built upon the different trajectories of professional socialization) inside each of these professional fields, but greatly apartheid in each side of these categorical frontiers.

However, another large scale mechanism is superposed upon this, differentiating, over time, the networks of individuals in conditions of poverty from those of the middle class. It is what I call the **economy of ties**, which concerns the economic, emotional and temporal costs and personal efforts that go into creating and, particularly, maintaining ties: keeping contact, making visits, doing things together, etc. Apparently, certain individuals find it much more difficult to bear these costs and, therefore, experience far greater limitations in building and, especially, maintaining them. As a result, whole portions of the networks of people living in poverty are abandoned periodically, slipping into a period of latency, only for the individual to find, later on, that they cannot be reactivated. In more extreme cases, relationships may end up being entirely forgotten. This mechanism operates constantly and regularly leading to the loss of part of the individual's relational structure, gradually whittling away and impoverishing the spectrum of sociability therein contained.

While this mechanism can potentially affect all networks, it tends to attack those of the poor most intensely, especially the migrant poor. Migration (including intra-urban migration) creates additional costs when it comes to maintaining ties, but while poor migrants will often shed a substantial percentage of their networks through the migratory process, middle-class migrants manage to keep more of their former local network alive and active. On the other hand, the non-migrant poor face an effect somewhat similar to that experienced by the migrant when it comes to maintaining

ties, even if the phenomenon has a more peripheral effect on the constitution of their relational structures.

The aggregate effect of these mechanisms is that middle-class networks are larger and richer in terms of sociability and represent an overlapping of networks from various periods of life and different spheres. Poor people's networks, on the other hand, are smaller, less varied and generally newer, as accumulations over time are fewer and a much more expressive number of contacts and spheres of sociability being jettisoned with far greater regularity.

Distinguishing between the networks of people living in poverty

A second set of mechanisms makes distinctions between the networks of the poor, making them increasingly more heterogeneous over the individual's lifetime, regardless of his/her attributes.

The differentiations among the poor begin from the **initial relational insertion of the migrant (and the young non-migrant) on the jobs market** and in the world of opportunities in general, with lasting effects on their future lives. On one hand, this mechanism concerns the fact that the migrant poor depend on the ties available to them at their place of arrival, especially those provided by the people who encouraged or facilitated the move, be they family members or other close contacts. Their first jobs are usually obtained through these ties, which will also influence the kind of activities these people go into, as their professional socialization tends to occur 'on the job'. As such, the opportunities open to the migrant are largely derived from their relationships with individuals already present at their place of arrival – or places, in the case of those who move on soon after touching first base. These first activities and contacts tend to influence the conditions the individual lives under shortly after his/her arrival, especially in virtue of their low degree of professional specialization prior to obtaining their first jobs in the new city. This creates a certain dependency upon occupational specialization, with the future very much hinging upon the spread of relational opportunities encountered upon the migrant's arrival. The interesting thing is that these are largely incidental, as migrants have no control over (and little knowledge of) what they will find at their destination in spatial and relational terms, often having only a very sketchy idea of the social situation and occupational activity of the individuals who directly assist them in the move.

I do not want to give this or any other mechanism an air of determination. All mechanisms increase the probability of certain events occurring and, in some cases, do

so in a manner that is dependent upon the individual's trajectory. In the case of relational opportunities encountered upon arrival in a new city, the interviews identified cases of individuals who found themselves arriving into rich relational structures that enabled them to find good quality occupations. In these cases, Granovetter's logic of weak ties does not apply, as for the new arrival, or the first-time job-seeker, job-related information provided by strong ties is strategic to obtaining a decent placement. Less fortunate individuals, however, arrive into totally unskilled and low-paid jobs, and are forced to enter future circuits of low-quality employment.

Something similar happens with non-migrant first-time job-seekers, an effect more noticeable in Salvador than in São Paulo, due to the lower number of migrants and longer terms of residence in the neighborhoods in the case of Salvador. Given the relational discontinuity in the individual's educational trajectory mentioned earlier, the poor person's first job placement is frequently the result of relational opportunities provided by individuals with whom a given ego has some tie, which, at this phase of life, is most likely to be a family member or neighbor. Likewise, in this context, those first professional activities will tend to derive from the network of some third party and therefore lie beyond the individual's control. It is needless to repeat the importance of these first job placements to the individual's future professional life. The Salvador cases suggest that those who get their first jobs through connections established inside organizations tend to have a better professional initiation. In this case, the entrance to the labor market receives the effect of the lower homophily present in organizations, as we will see in a moment.

At least in part, the issue is also related to the attributes of the individual, via homophily, seen as migrants from better backgrounds tend to be brought to new countries/cities through networks of individuals with similarly good backgrounds (or, in the case of non-migrants, families of a similar type). These people also tend to live in better areas and be connected to people who are more established and better-inserted professionally speaking. However, this dynamic incorporates a significant parcel of chance, especially for migrants, and is by no means deterministic, although tends to generate persistent and significant inequalities similar to those described by Tilly (2005). This effect is produced by the formation of monopolies of opportunities for the few, privileging individuals from the same social group and urban location, as identified by Kaztman (1999).

Obviously, the same elements highlighted earlier on concerning the differences between middle-class networks and those of the poor also produce differences among

and within the latter. As such, the relational structures of poor youths entering into adult life will also be marked by their different **school life sociabilities and socializations for the workplace**. Consequently, youths who manage to enroll on third-level courses (just as, to a lesser degree, second-level and technical schooling) will tend to surpass the others, not only due to the effects of education and professional formation already dealt with in the literature, but also through the relational mechanism mentioned above. It is worth underscoring here that this mechanism may superpose positively or negatively with the earlier one, either reducing the isolation experienced by the young job-seeker who finds his/her first placement through opportunities offered by limited relational networks, or increasing it.

Likewise, along the life trajectories of the poor, **the economy of ties** makes its presence felt in varied ways. The interviews were replete with accounts of the abandonment of significant parcels of individual networks, and the individuals living in poverty better equipped to bear the costs of maintaining their contacts tend to accumulate larger, more diversified networks that retain contacts from distinct social moments. Inversely, those with fewer resources tend to accumulate relational disadvantages, leading to latency and a certain ongoing network die-back. Needless to say, this accumulation of disadvantages is wholly regressive, as the poorer the individual, the more inexorable the mechanism.

Another important mechanism also impacts upon the opportunities individuals have to draw on their networks for assistance, and it works in a similar fashion to the economy of ties. This mechanism concerns an **association between trust and homophily**. As we have seen, individuals tend to trust their fellows, and the most costly or chronic forms of help are usually given only to those we trust. In the words of one interviewee: "for me, trust is when someone has the same habits as you, likes the same things as you, has the same fiber as you, frequents the same places as you and has the same tastes as you". Hence it is far more likely that we will deposit trust in people who share our beliefs, behaviors and practices.

The importance of homophily grows even more in relations based on some degree of intimacy, as in emotional support and confidences. Examples of this abounded, including youths confiding in peers with whom they had a lot in common, homosexuals confiding in other homosexuals, evangelical Christians in other evangelical Christians, and so on. This selectiveness seems to be connected with the fact that, as these issues are often of a personal nature, they will involve moral judgments mediated by the existence of a homophily of behaviors and ideas and

associated with the presence of intimacy in the relationship. This homophily potentizes a sharing of languages and repertoires that makes it easier to understand the issues under discussion.

This association tends to create vicious circles in the provision of the types of more costly and trust based support only to those closest to oneself (the second and third types of assistance cited earlier), i.e., people similar to oneself and belonging to the same groups (for example, coming from the same place, having the same religion or personal behavior), thus reducing the circulation of repertoires and information, even among the poor. The outcome for the poorer among the poor is, once again, an accumulation of disadvantages and reinforced isolation. It is reasonable to imagine that this phenomenon also occurs among the middle-class, but in that case it leads to a monopolization of opportunities in the sense of Tilly (2005), among groups as among individuals. With regard to the poor, given their restricted access to opportunities, it contributes to an “imprisonment” of some individuals within situations of low access to help, goods and services, whether via the market or otherwise, contributing to the incessant reproduction and compounding of inequalities.

The results indicate that, in the case of individuals who inhabit segregated locales, another mechanism introduces even greater heterogeneity. On average, the networks of those who live in segregated locations tend to contain a slightly higher proportion of people who live in the community - higher localism. However, some individuals in segregated places manage to have highly varied and less local sociability, and those are the ones who have better living conditions among the segregated, including income. This effect is completely absent among the non segregated. So, here another mechanism of differentiation comes to bear, as, **for segregated individuals, the connection with opportunities is mediated by the variability of the individual's sociability and by the different degrees of localism** present in their networks. As the effect of social isolation does not apply to people who do not live in segregation, heterogeneity of sociability will have no direct effect on their revenues, suggesting that rich networks tend to counterweight the isolational effect of spatial segregation.

While this constitutes an important mechanism in the generation of heterogeneity within segregated groups, it tends to reduce the explicative capacity of the category of segregation per se. However, it is not a question of the absence of the effect of segregation, as a superficial quantitative analysis of the difference between the segregated and non-segregated might suggest, for example, but rather one of the

effects of a combination between segregation, localism and variability of sociability in the individual's day-to-day strategies. This result is very important, as it confirms the research hypothesis on the conjunctive relevance of segregation and networks on conditions of poverty, though in a complex and indirect way. As both networks and segregation mediate the individual's access to opportunity structures, the only way to consider the phenomenon is by considering them in conjunction.

In addition to the relational opportunities encountered among migrants, built along the course of the individual's schooling or rendered viable by sociability, individuals have access to other "windows of opportunity" for relational patterns that grant them access to lower localism and homophily. In addition to the opportunities that stem from network contacts (derived from the elements discussed above), there is also the potential effect of other networks being tapped by a given ego, even if these are not actually incorporated into his/her own. The cases studied suggest the existence of a mechanism that produces this contact through **attending certain locations or belonging to certain organizations in which a great deal of information circulates**. Frequenting such places gives one access to information filtered through the networks of other individuals who also frequent those locales or organizations, but who may not belong to the network of the ego in question. The results corroborate Small (2009) when he lists the effects that different organizations have on the formation and maintenance of ties. The question here does not lie in the networks themselves, nor in their weak ties such as in Granovetter's work, but in the fact that certain places congregate people with diverse and rich networks which an ego can access merely by frequenting the same places, without actually belonging to any of those networks. These are meeting places such as public squares, but also hairdressers, or churches and associations. Not all meeting places have the same impact, as it largely depends on the type of people who frequent them. There is a lot of randomness in the encounters of the networks, although the characteristics of some organizations – more or less competitive environments, or more or less issue oriented, for example – certainly influence the probability of those encounters (Small, 2009). In general, the more homophilic the frequenters, the less effective is the mechanism. Through this mechanism, individuals with very local and highly homophilic networks can gain access to information disseminated through others, perhaps wider networks.

The effect of this mechanism is obviously associated with the core evidence of the quantitative part of this study, namely that people with sociabilities constructed in organizational environments, such as work, church or associations, tend to enjoy a

better social situation. But the description of the mechanism is ampler than that and includes a new element associated with these meeting points, and not necessarily only organizations. The degrees of homophily present in different places will probably play a definitive role in mobilizing this mechanism.

Regardless of the relational opportunities available to individuals, the dynamic of social assistance in our daily lives related earlier can improve or worsen the situation of potentially available assistance, as **these assistances can change the types of tie** involved in a relationship. Offering help can boost the levels of trust or intimacy in a relationship, turning acquaintances who lend an occasional hand into friends upon whom one can rely for more constant and costly assistance. One example of a situation that can create this kind of change is the provision of help at a time of crisis. One case recounted by a mother of two in a tenement illustrates the situation. Her neighbor, recently moved in with no connections in the tenement, had three small children and no-one to look after them when she went to work. As she left the kids locked all day in a room, one of the other neighbors called child support and the police arrived to investigate. The interviewee went to fetch the kids from the room and hid them from the police, saying that the denunciation was a hoax. Since that day, the interviewee and the mother of the children have become very close friends and help each other reciprocally.

Conversely, other changes could have a negative impact and cause the relationship between individuals to deteriorate, dissipating the stock of contacts that could potentially provide more costly and constant help. This can happen through changes of address, with a subsequent drifting away from now latent contacts, but it can also stem from conflicts and a loss of trust, or even due to the death of alters who occupy important positions in the network. However, we have seen how certain ties are too strong to allow for definitive rupture, with contact slipping into a lingering latency, as often happens among family members. Even in these cases, however, the result is a loss of support all the same. In both cases, the issue is not the transformation of network structures, which can stay the same, but the contents of those structures, with major consequences for the benefit that can be expected from them.

Lastly, it is worth highlighting the conjoint effect the mechanisms have over the course of an individual's lifecycle. The accounts we heard indicate that the mechanisms discussed here may **gradually erode the individual's freedom of choice**, making them dependent on their prior trajectories in the sense described by Pierson (2004). A



result of this process is that the individual is drawn further and further away from the best opportunities while living in situations that become increasingly more confined in social terms. This path dependency does not signify an imperative of constrained action, as the individuals continue to make choices in their daily lives. What it does mean, however, is that the array of options available to the individual can become increasingly limited over the course of certain trajectories, distancing them from other, once more similar situations. This process represents another mechanism for the production of heterogeneity among the poor, but one which operates through the superposing of the effects of earlier mechanisms.

However, I would like to underline another element associated with this, and which backs it up, insofar as it concerns action. One can speculate that cognitive mechanisms akin to those described by Elster (1998) are constantly operating upon lifetime trajectories, adapting the individual's worldviews to the situations experienced in their daily lives. For some people at least, this means that their perspectives and views on the world are socially shaped so as to adapt to ever more restrictive dead-end situations that shrink their liberty. I refer to certain cultural elements, widely understood as frames (Lamont and Small, 2008) – i.e., ways of comprehending the world that shape the backdrop to the narratives through which individuals understand and give meaning to their own lives to themselves and to others. Once installed, these worldviews inform practices differently and influence the strategies individuals put into action, as well as the goals they set in relation to sundry quotidian dimensions of their lives, including the jobs market. In doing so, they embrace or reject the opportunities their networks can bring to them through earlier mechanisms.

However, it is essential to underscore that I am not referring here to collective cultural elements, but to cultural referentials that inform individual actions in different ways and which are influenced by specific lifetime trajectories. In this sense, this mechanism pits itself against the prevailing view in the literature that thematizes the so-called culture of poverty in a homogeneous and socially wide-reaching way (Lamont and Small, 2008) and works toward differentiating individuals and attaining an understanding of the social group as something more heterogeneous. It is also worth highlighting that these worldviews constitute necessary conditions, but are not themselves sufficient for action. While they can tell us a lot about average individual behavior, they do not allow us to comprehend why some individuals informed by them act in a certain manner while others do not. The analytical gain in understanding the effect lies in grasping the modal variations within these behaviors.

These cultural referentials are impacted in adaptive form by cumulative trajectories of destitution associated with innumerable negative events, not to mention disastrous choices on the part of the individual, that combine to construct an endless spiral of precariousness. In the most extreme cases, those in which individuals find themselves at the limits of survival, many descend into situations in which they start to thematize their lives in fatalistic terms, thereby restricting even further their capacity to act.

Needless to say, as with other earlier mechanisms, here, once again, we see the production and reproduction of persisting inequalities in the sense outlined by Tilly, reinforcing social situations in a circular manner, especially when the mechanisms operate in conjunction.

#### **4. Concluding remarks: Relational mechanisms and the reproduction of social conditions**

As we have seen, the conjoint study of social networks and segregation can point us down important paths to understanding poverty, revealing the existence of an association between characteristics of networks and sociability and conditions of life. Yet in order to better understand how the networks operate differently between social groups, we must first analyze the mechanisms responsible for shaping those networks, mediating their use by individuals and influencing their actions.

Some mechanisms differentiate between the networks of the poor and those of the middle class, while others generate heterogeneity among the poor, just as they influence the reproduction of inequalities. These mechanisms involve different dynamics of access to learning, especially at university level; forms of meeting the costs of producing and maintaining ties; the spatial dimensions of migration within the city, the professional initiation; the transformation of types of tie; and combinations between types of sociability and segregation. Various mechanisms present a circular and cumulative functioning, reproducing situations of poverty among individuals. Other mechanisms create opportunities or render strategies viable so that individuals can escape from these vicious circles, as in the case of greater variability of sociability among certain segregated individuals or the continuous transformation of tie types.

However, for at least some of these individuals, cumulative trajectories may gradually narrow the choice options available. In the case of at least one cross-section, there maybe in place processes of accumulation of destitutions that feed a sense of

desperation and fatalism, thus tightening the grip of the vicious circles that may help reproduce inequalities and poverty in such persistent fashion.

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