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Toward an Understanding of the Spatiality of Urban Poverty: The Urban Poor as Spatial Actors

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The last two decades have witnessed an explosion of empirical research on the spatial aspects of social life. Several spatial metaphors, including 'free spaces' (Polletta, 1999), 'safe spaces' (Collins, 1991: 95–6, 142, 144–5; Byng, 1998), 'gendered spaces' (Spain, 1993; 2001; Haney, 1996; DeSena, 2000), and 'racialized spaces' (Haymes, 1995; Gotham, 1998; 2002) have appeared regularly in the work of sociologists and reflect past research traditions and attempts to create new ones (Lobao, 1993; Gieryn, 2000; Tickamyer, 2000). Other scholars are increasingly emphasizing the interplay of space and social action in research on the social organization of gang activity (Venkatesh, 1997), corporate interlocking directorates (Kono *et al*., 1998), the militarization of urban space (Davis, 1992), and social movements and political mobilization (Wright, 1997; Zhao, 1998; Davis, 1999). In addition, the recent 'spatial turn' in urban sociology and historical sociology has directed attention to the ways in which spatial arrangements operate as constitutive dimensions of social phenomena (Harvey, 1989; 1993; Zukin, 1991; 1995; Gottdiener, 1994; Isaac, 1997; Tickamyer, 2000). A common theme running through these different and diverse studies is the attempt to delineate why space is important and how the consideration of socio-spatial relations and conflicts can illuminate our understanding of social change. Although scholars disagree about how space influences social relations, they agree in viewing space as a means of production (i.e. land and real estate), an object of consumption, and a geographical site of social action. The plethora of research suggests that space and spatial issues have been an important topic of concern for some time in empirical sociology. Yet it is ironic that we have witnessed this explosion of scholarly research on the role of space in group life at the same time scholars have lamented the under-theorization of space in sociology (for an overview, see Friedland and Boden, 1994: 4).

In this article, I offer a critique of 'neighborhood effects' models of urban poverty and identify the limitations of 'adaptation' and 'resistance' accounts of the actions of the urban poor. Moving beyond the space-as-container ontology, I conceptualize space as a social construction that shapes social action and guides behavior. Central to this constructionist framework is the idea that spatial boundaries, identities and meanings are negotiated, defined and produced through social interaction, social conflict and struggles between different groups. I maintain that a full understanding of the actions of the urban poor requires recognition of the spatial nature of human agency. Space has long been considered a secondary topic in sociology, the appropriate focus of geographers and other non-sociologists. In particular, sociological theory has been indifferent to space and spatial considerations, viewing space as a neutral backdrop against which action unfolds, or reducing it to a metaphor.[1] Yet these conceptualiza-

1 British sociologist Peter Saunders (1989: 231), for example, suggests that 'social theory has been quite right to treat space as a backdrop against which social action takes place. [. . .] Space does not 'enter into' what we do in any meaningful sense, because mere space can have no causal properties

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tions miss a fundamental point: space is a social relation that is involved in the production and reproduction of social structures, social action, and relations of power and resistance.

The seminal work of Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault represent recent attempts to refashion social theory to take into account the reflexive relationship between space and social action. In stressing the enabling and constraining aspects of social structure (the duality of structure) — a central assumption of structuration theory — Giddens (1989: 280) argues that 'we cannot speak about space without talking of the spatial attributes of a substantive phenomenon'. Pierre Bourdieu developed a theoretical framework using the concepts 'habitus' and 'field' to highlight and explain the spatial and temporal attributes of agency and structure. For Bourdieu (1977), the creation of 'habitus' — the 'ensemble of dispositions' that orient action and perception — occurs when people form specific codes of spatial performance through social situations. The concept 'field' refers to situations where organized groups of actors produce place-specific forms of identity, consciousness and knowledge. In the writing of Michel Foucault, the concept 'heterotopias' refers to those oppositional spaces that form with relations of domination and subordination and serve as the birthplace for political mobilization and revolution. Space, Foucault (1977: 70) suggests, can no longer be treated as the 'the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile' (quoted in Liggett and Perry, 1995: 3) but must be seen as 'fundamental in any form of communal life' and 'fundamental in any exercise of power' (Foucault, 1984: 253).

The main contribution of this article is to synthesize conceptual insights that already exist in the literature to push forward a more coherent view of how theorizing space and spatial issues might make progress. I am not offering a full-blown theory of space nor am I presenting a set of testable hypotheses. Instead, I wish to critique dominant conceptualizations of urban poverty that view space as static, a container or neutral backdrop in which action unfolds. By doing so, I wish to suggest a new conceptualization of space that can contribute to our understanding the actions of the poor. I argue that while empirical sociology has focused considerable attention on the significance of spatial location in social life, poverty research has underemphasized the spatiality of poor people's agency. At the core of the article is an attempt to theorize agency as a spatial phenomenon and offer insight into how different spatial meanings enable or constrain particular forms of social action and behavior.[2] More broadly, my intent is to contribute to an understanding of the urban poor as spatial actors. I argue that the importance of space lies in understanding it as a material product of social relations, a manifestation of social relations, and a social relation itself.

and is quite incapable of entering into anything. It is passive; it is context'. For Sayer (1984: 282), spatial forms are 'countless abstractions' because 'until we specify what kinds of objects with what kinds of causal powers actually constitute spatial relations, there can be no abstract general theory of space that is applicable to all objects'. Despite their differences, these theorists maintain that while empirical analyses are correct to take into account spatial variations and emphasize the importance of the peculiarities of space, theory 'will be indifferent to spatial context, for its concern lies in developing generalizable knowledge which transcends the particular conditions of any one specific place' (Saunders, 1989: 232). As Saunders forcefully argues, the sociological explanation is, quite simply, 'that there is nothing for theory to say about space!' (*ibid.*: 232).

2 Many sociologists have conceptualized agency and its counterparts — actors, action, behavior, and so on — in different ways. Several scholars have also offered suggestions on how to integrate agency and structure (see Giddens, 1984; Alexander, 1987; Sewell, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Joas, 1996; Fuchs, 2001). My purpose is not to engage the debate over theories of agency and action directly, which is done in Emirbayer and Mische (1998), or debates over structure, which is done in Hays (1994). Instead my purpose is to push forward the conceptual project of linking space and agency and provide the theoretical resources to resolve a number of conundrums in empirical research on poverty.

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Classical and contemporary contributions to the sociology of space

The concern with the reflexive relationship between space and social relations has a deep tradition in sociology. To be sure, a focus on spatiality is not entirely new, despite the renewed attention paid to space in recent years. Spatial issues and concerns were present in the classical work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. Marx and Engels depicted the space of the modern metropolis as expressing most vividly the peculiarities of capitalism including, for example, the antithesis between wage labor and capital, the valorization/realization of exchange-value, and proletarization of the populace (Marx and Engels, 1848: 476; 1867: 188–245).[3] In the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim (1965: 11–12, 440–1) developed a theory of knowledge premised on the assumption that the socio-spatial organization of groups is the model for the mental organization of ideas. He maintained that the first collective framework for understanding the world and classifying knowledge was the model of spatial relationships. In particular, individuals constitute themselves as groups based on their collective comprehension and expression of concepts of direction, distance and center. In his famous essay, 'Metropolis and Mental Life', Georg Simmel (1903) drew attention to the intensity of nervous stimuli and the pervasiveness of money relations in forming an urban personality that is reserved, detached and blasé.[4] In his more general writings on the sociology of space, Simmel attempted to move theorizing away from conceptualizing space as a container or context of action to conceptualizing space as meaningful sociation. To do so, he identified five analytic dimensions of space: the exclusiveness or uniqueness of space, boundaries of space, fixing of social forms in space, spatial proximity and distance, and movement of space (for overviews, see Frisby, 1992: 103–7; Urry, 1996: 374–5).

Later, US sociologists focused attention on space, using spatial concepts to understand and explain the basis of social action, stability and change. These issues were present in Talcott Parsons's writings on the dimensions of 'action space' (Parsons and Bales, 1953), and in Pitrim Sorokin's (1964) theorization of socio-cultural 'distance' and 'nearness'. The early symbolic interactionists, especially the work of George Herbert Mead (1962: 46) and Herbert Blumer (1969: 10), attempted to identify the process by which actors endow social forces acting upon them and their own behaviors with meaning, using specific symbols and 'objects' to understand and move about in the material world. Later, Erving Goffman (1959: 22–25) developed a dramaturgical metaphor to explain how people 'frame' different physical settings in various ways to construct and support their performance. The early Chicago School sociologists devoted much effort to examining the social forces behind the spatial ordering of urban communities, land-use conflicts and social movement networking. In essence, Robert Park, Ernst Burgess and Roderick McKenzie focused on developing a set of propositions that could explain the spatial ordering of different groups in the city, and specify linkages between the internal differentiation of the city and the process of growth (Park *et al*., 1925). Yet a lacuna of the Chicago School, and later ecological studies, was the conceptualization of space as a proxy for demographic, structural, economic or behavioral variables — a conceptualization that played a critical, if

3 While many of Marx and Engel's examinations of capitalism had an urban and spatial dimension, the latter was not a central object of study in their work. Space remained an undeveloped concept, providing a setting or backdrop for understanding the historical development of capitalism (for overviews, see Saunders, 1981; Frisby, 2001: 4).

4 In Simmel's general thesis, the development of a mature money economy resulted in a progressive estrangement of social relations from space (i.e. an emancipation of the social from geographic location). In addition, new communication technologies (e.g. the telegraph in the nineteenth century) enabled time to overcome spatial differences which, in turn, shifted attention from the issue of spatial location. According to Frisby (1992: 107): Where this has become a more generalized thesis in social theory, it may account for the neglect of social space as a central issue'.

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unintended, role in marginalizing the study of space within US sociology (Logan and Molotch, 1987:100; for an overview, see Gottdiener, 1994: 27–41). Despite other theorists focus on spatiality, space remained an under-theorized concept in sociology and the sociology of space lost favor with sociologists in the post-second world war era.

Friedland and Boden (1994) have observed that during the past two decades, space has begun to receive renewed attention among sociologists. This revival of space reflects several major developments, including a recognition of transformations in the temporal and spatial nature of modernity, increasing criticism of deductive research agendas and aspatial covering law models (Lobao, 1993; 1996: 79–80), and the opening of a broad-based interdisciplinary dialogue between sociologists and geographers.[5] Several European scholars have also noted this convergence, including John Urry (2001), David Harvey (1993) and Manuel Castells (1996: 410; 1997), among others. Spatial metaphors and terms now permeate major strands of sociological research on time and space: e.g. transnational spaces (Kivisto, 2002), de- and re- territorialization (Brenner, 1999), glocalization (Swyngedow, 1997), global-local nexus (Peck and Tickell, 1994), and so on. In addition, a number of scholars have begun to rethink basic social categories such as class and power through the prism of space. For Urry (1996: 378–9) 'space makes a clear difference to the degree to which [. . .] the causal powers of social entities (such as class, the state, capitalist relations, patriarchy) are realized'. Related to this discussion is Henri Lefebvre's (1991: 416) assertion that 'groups, classes, or fractions of classes cannot constitute themselves, or recognize one another, as 'subjects' unless they generate (or produce) a space'. The fact that 'space matters', according to geographer Doreen Massey (1984: 14), requires us to consider that 'processes take place over space, the facts of distances, closeness, of geographic variation between areas, of individual character and meaning of specific places and repair — all these are essential in the operation of social processes themselves'.

Despite this renewed focus on the spatiality of social life, I argue that space remains under-theorized in sociology, especially US sociological research on urban poverty. While many sociological examinations of inequality, segregation and social change assert the importance of space, space usually provides a setting for understanding otherwise exogenous processes. While there are, of course, exceptions to this tendency (for overviews, see Lobao, 1993; Gieryn, 2000; Tickamyer, 2000), serious conceptual discussion about space has been secondary in sociological theorizing generally. We can understand this lack of theoretical attention when considering that the specificity of space implicitly problematizes deductive research agendas that privilege aspatial covering law models. Much of the sociological study of space and poverty is directed to hypothesis testing and in linking macrolevel contexts with individual outcomes. Conceptualist strategies are usually not clearly specified, and space tends to become a laboratory for testing sociological generalizations, including, for example, how broader societal changes work themselves out in a particular locale. Despite growing recognition of the need for a more spatialized sociology (Giddens, 1979; 1990), deductive research traditions, grand theorizing, and aspatial generalizations remain (for overviews, see Gotham and Staples, 1996; Lobao, 1996: 78–80).

Agency and space in US poverty research

Over the last few decades, much research on urban poverty has focused attention on the role of 'neighborhood effects' in socially isolating the urban poor from education and

5 For some examples, see in sociology Zukin (1991), Friedland and Boden (1994), Gottdiener (1994), Wright (1997), Urry (2001); in geography Wilson (1992), Liggett and Perry (1995), Watson and Gibson (1995), Soja (2000), Hudson (2001); and in anthropology Scott (1990) and Gregory (1998). The establishment of scholarly journals such as *City and Community*, *Space and Culture*, and *Gender, Place and Culture* attests to the growing importance of space among scholars.

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employment opportunities, and restricting avenues for pursuing upward mobility. According to William Julius Wilson (1987: 57), what distinguishes members of the *underclass* — those residents who live in census tracts in which at least 40% of the residents are poor — from other 'economically disadvantaged residents is that their marginal economic position or weak attachment to the labor force is uniquely reinforced by their neighborhood, or social milieu'. Jargowsky (1997) and Kasinitz and Rosenberg (1996) have noted that much of the research on neighborhood effects embraces spatial metaphors — 'concentration effects', 'spatial isolation, 'ghettoized poor', 'super poverty areas' — to delineate the causes and consequences of urban poverty. In this poverty scholarship, scholars assume that places, particularly geographically-bounded 'neighborhoods', have socially significant attributes — i.e. 'emergent properties' (Kasinitz, 2000: 254) — over and above the individual attributes of those residents who live there. Yet scholars disagree on the conceptual and operational definitions of 'neighborhood effects' and the exact linkages between 'neighborhood effects' and the individual behaviors and actions of the poor (for an overview, see Bauder, 2001; 2002; Sampson et *al*., 2002).

It is precisely the interplay between space and poor people's agency that are not well documented, either theoretically or in specific empirical areas, in the poverty literature. At least two major factors have directed the study of poverty away from such issues. First, in many accounts, space forms a concrete setting usually employed by the analyst as backdrop or geographical demarcation that reconstitutes space as a heuristic device to detect, represent and explain broad societal processes. In this conception, the researcher typically roots explanatory inferences in spatial context, using geographic or cartographic metaphors that suggest some relative regularity in a set of institutional or structural arrangements. Scholars working within contemporary empirical studies that use quantitative techniques, for example, typically transform space into an empirical aggregate of variables suitable for conventional scientific and causal analysis. In variable treatments, space freezes social conditions so that the analyst can then parse them into artificially changing units for analysis required by the assumptions of experimental methods or hypothesis testing. When the hypothesis is not supported, researchers typically invoke the spatial setting as the explanatory mechanism that links extra-local socio-economic and demographic factors with individual behaviors. The problem with this type of explanation is that it relies on a 'black box' model of spatial and social effects and makes no assumption about how space influences individual behavior (Jencks and Mayer, 1990: 115). In both variable and non-variable accounts, space is mundane, a setting, backdrop, or stage for 'something else that becomes the focus of sociological attention' (Gieryn, 2000: 466; see also Bauder, 2001; 2002). Lobao (1996: 94) has identified several problems of both qualitative and quantitative sociological studies that 'bracket out' space:

> First, the locale or region tends to represented by or reducible to several variables of interest, with the result that the holistic or Gestalt of place setting is lost. Second, place is examined mainly as a constraining factor rather than as one which emerges and changes from rounds of social action. Although the local context is seen to affect individuals, how individuals construct local social life and institutions is neglected [. . .] Third, explanatory contribution tends to be limited: at worst, studies tell only if a hypothesis is supported in certain locales; at best, the reasons why a few attributes of locale might affect a prespecified relationship are outlined. Fourth, as the richness of locale and region is not fully tapped, studies may lose pertinent insights.

Second, poverty researchers have tended to employ the tropes of 'adaptation' or 'resistance' to explain the diverse actions and behaviors of the poor. While there is much diversity in its empirical application, the adaptation model has focused on routines, habitual behaviors and relatively unreflective patterns of action (for overviews, see Venkatesh, 1997; Wacquant, 1997; Wright, 1997). This stimulus and response orientation shifts attention away from human agency per se and more toward the structural context that shapes action. According to Venkatesh (1997), the 'catch-all

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category of adaptation (and its analytic synonyms: adjustment, response, substitution, etc.)' (p. 90) is reminiscent of 'functionalist resonances' (p. 96) and 'blind determinism' (p. 101) that erase the complexity of events and actions within poor communities. Poverty researchers have also criticized adaptation models for imparting and reinforcing totalizing views of poor neighborhoods as places of 'social disorganization', mired in 'tangles of pathology', and 'socially isolated' from the values and resources of 'mainstream society'. This applying of a conceptual model of 'disorganization' is problematic for three reasons. First, it imparts an image of the poor that stigmatizes the disadvantaged, and, more important, focuses scholarly attention on the most extreme, threatening and disreputable behaviors of poor residents as symptomatic of the entire ghetto. Second, it imputes a monolithic conception of ghetto distinctiveness that serves to block or screen alternative ways of understanding the lives of the poor. Third, the model does not explain how neighborhood characteristics perpetuate antisocial behavior and shape social and economic outcomes.[6]

Alternative 'resistance' accounts have attempted to highlight the oppositional elements, insurgency, and mobilization potential of poor people (Fordman and Ogbu, 1986; Scott, 1990; Bourgois, 1995). For example, James Scott (1990), among others, explores the ways in which subordinate groups develop a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power and strategy of resistance that is covert, disguised and relatively anonymous. In contrast to the public transcript of open and public interaction between subordinates and those who dominate, the term 'hidden transcript' characterizes discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond observation by the dominant. While resistance theorists attempt to highlight the modes of opposition among subordinate groups, 'resistance' models lack specificity in analyzing the varying degrees of purpose and intent, strategic mobilization, and goal-seeking shown by the poor in understanding their predicament and challenging marginality. Resistance theorists also disagree over the definitions and criteria used to determine whether an act qualifies as resistance: the outcome of the act (outcome criteria) or the actor's intention (intention criteria) (Davies, 1995; Willis, 1977). The outcome criteria, according to Stombler and Padvic (1997: 258), 'conflates the act with its outcome, and thus strips all agency from actors'. The intention criteria ignores the conflictual and contradictory relationships between human agency and social reproduction due to the tendency to include a broad range of behaviors within the category.

We can understand these conceptual and analytical problems by recognizing that poverty researchers have typically viewed space as a platform or context to understand poverty. In quantitative analyses of poverty, for example, space (geographically bounded areas) forms a neutral 'setting' employed by the researcher to detect, represent and explain 'neighborhood effects'. Researchers root explanatory inferences in the manipulation of causal variables that suggest some independent effect of geographical scale on the social outcomes of the poor (for a useful critique, see Bauder, 2001; 2002). Likewise, in both adaptation and resistance accounts of the actions of the poor, scholars view space as a background factor or neutral force where structural contexts are analytically separate from capacities for human agency. Yet neither adaptation nor resistance capture the full complexity of poor people's agency. Indeed, we lose a sense of the dynamic interplay of constraining and enabling dimensions of action if we conflate adaptation or resistance with agency itself. What both adaptation and resistance accounts obscure is the degree to which human agents invest places (home, neighborhoods, cities, states, nations, and so on) with social meaning, and how and for what purposes that meaning is then used to guide action, challenge inequalities and build community. On the one hand, we cannot understand local communities just in

6 These critiques are not without controversy (for an overview, see Bauder, 2001; 2002). While Venkatesh (1997), Wacquant (1997), Wright (1997) and others have questioned the validity, methodology and assumptions of 'neighborhood effects' studies and the 'disorganization' thesis, they have yet to elaborate a conceptual framework that extends beyond a critique of adaptation models.

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terms of the actions and behaviors of people living in that community. On the other hand, we cannot dismiss the specifics of what happens in localities as *merely* the spatial manifestation of larger, impersonal, macrostructural forces. Thus, most poverty researchers agree that space matters but there is little agreement as to how to conceptualize space and how analysis of space should proceed.

An alternative research agenda

One way of moving beyond this impasse is to develop an approach that deals explicitly with spatial issues and views poor peoples' actions as unfolding in a nuanced fashion in/through space. At the heart of this agenda is the reconceptualization of agency as a complex spatial dynamic and the reconceptualization of space as social construction. Rather than viewing space as something that is 'out there' (i.e. an impersonal and external force), we can redefine and analyze space as a mediating link between macro-social constraints and actions of the poor. Focusing on this dialectical interplay means viewing space as an object of political struggle, a constitutive component of human agency, and a facilitator as well as constraint upon action (for overviews, see Gottdiener, 1994; Wright, 1997). Scholars have investigated this multidimensional conception of space from a variety of angles, including the links between white racial identity and the constructed identity of the suburban homeowner (Gotham, 1998), the corporatization of urban gang activity (Venkatesh, 1997), homeless mobilizations (Wright, 1997), community-based institutions (Bauder, 2001), and struggles over urban disinvestment (Wilson, 1993).

Recently, Krista Brumley and I have developed a conceptual tool, *using space*, to illustrate the spatial attributes and spatial influences of human agency, and particularly the ways in which residents in a public housing development construct a meaningful attachment to place and challenge stigmatized identities and negative stereotypes associated with project life (Gotham and Brumley, 2002). Using space is a process of place identity construction and disavowal. It refers to the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present and sustain a personal identity tied to place and to challenge alternative meanings, degradations and stigma of residential life and space. Using space may involve several different social activities, including, for example, the creation of informal social networks, the development of specific styles of interaction, and the routinization of particular forms of spatial movement to satisfy material needs and obtain an array of goods and services. Furthermore, using space may refer to the efforts of marginalized groups to create a modicum of security and trust in a neighborhood. In addition, people may use space to form a spatially-defined social identity that connects and overlaps with ethnicity, race, gender, class, sexual orientation and other identities. Most scholars agree that identities are not static and immutable but involve different elements that interconnect with each other in complex and multifaceted ways. Patricia Hill Collins' (1991) work on the interlocking dimensions of race, class and gender highlights how identity is composed of 'both/and' reality as opposed to an 'either/or' distinction. Like race, class and gender, places can become important mechanisms through which people define and express a personal and collective identity (Gotham, 1999). The implication is that the content and political force of identities are intimately bound up with the meanings and symbols people attach to particular socio-physical spaces.

Our research draws on ethnographic data and interviews to explain how public housing residents 'use space' strategically, employing different spatial metaphors to demarcate physical structures — e.g. buildings, streets, and so on — as cognitive boundary markers to guide their daily spatial movement and facilitate selective association with some individuals and groups while avoiding others. Some spatial metaphors that residents use ('safe spaces') provide a measure of security and protection against the risks of living in public housing while others ('hot spaces')

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delimit areas of criminality and drug activity that some residents seek to avoid. Whereas safe spaces provide a sense of trust and security that comes with familiar surroundings and people, hot spaces are labeled as sites of potential danger. Notions of 'danger', 'fear' and 'safety' are cultural constructs imposed on a particular environment and learned as part of an understanding about the way 'everyday life' works. In public housing, residential life has evolved a 'code of the street' (Anderson, 1999) to the extent that residents form attitudes about which kinds of people, which places, and which times of day or night are safe or dangerous. For example, some residents embrace a caregiver identity, giving access to their home for victims of domestic violence, surveillng the activity of people coming to and from the neighborhood, caring for other residents' children, car pooling, and so on. The designation of safe spaces are part of a range of actions that resident use to acknowledge the presence of crime and danger in public housing while denying that all residents are dangerous or that crime pervades the entire development.[7]

In addition, when residents use the symbol 'hot space' to describe an area of public housing they are explicitly recognizing the existence of drug activity in certain areas within public housing. At the same time, they are attempting to disavow the stigmatized identity of a 'criminal' that they assign to individuals who frequent the hot spaces of the housing development. Residents are neither passively 'adapting' nor strategically 'resisting' when they use spatial metaphors to describe the development and guide their actions. Indeed, residents' discontent, frustration and verbal indignation of drug activity are attempts to assert an autonomous identity that opposes the stigmatized views of public housing *en masse*. Resistance to drug dealing is a form of categorical and role 'distanciation' (Snow and Anderson, 1987) that allows residents to gain social distance from criminal activity and negative interpretations of public housing. Rather than a backdrop of social actions and relations, hot spaces (and safe spaces) are a 'field of action' as well as a 'basis for action' (Giddens, 1979: 202, 207; Lefebvre, 1991: 191). Space is not a container of action but a social construction; it is a product of assigning meaning that then shapes action and guides behavior.

Residents of public housing use space in other ways. Some use identity 'embracement' and 'distancing' talk and behavior to affirm their attachment to place or to dissociate themselves from negative images of public housing space in response to the redevelopment of public housing. In recent years, the US federal government has pressured local housing authorities to demolish existing public housing units and convert larger projects into small-scale communities as a vehicle for promoting 'self-sufficiency' among tenants (Gotham *et al*., 2001). In many cities, the demolition of public housing has sparked much opposition and discontent among residents who fear being forced to face new financial burdens (i.e. utility bills), and potential loss of friendship ties and social networks. On the one hand, some residents welcome the redevelopment as an opportunity to leave public housing and reject the 'project identity'. On the other hand, other residents use the 'project identity' to express their meaningful attachment to place, and to challenge displacement and the resulting disruption of friendship ties and social networks. We can interpret resident opposition to public housing demolition as a form of 'institutional distanciation' (Snow and Anderson, 1987) whereby residents attempt to distance themselves from the impersonal services supplied by housing authorities and the contemptuous perceptions of project life. In the process, residents are attempting to cultivate an attachment to place that allows them to salvage a measure of dignity and personal autonomy. Thus, resistance to

7 Similar examples of 'place-making' have been found among black street corner men (Liebow, 1967; Anderson, 1999), homeless persons (Wright, 1997), minority women (Jarrett, 1994; Byng, 1998), and in mental hospitals (Goffman, 1961) and concentration camps (Dimsdale, 1980). In these and other cases, those individuals situated on the margins or at the bottom of the stratification system use various symbols, motifs and cultural imagery to contest stigma, develop coping strategies, establish or strengthen social ties with others, offer personal assistance to those in need, and contest the separation of public and private spheres.

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public housing demolition is not an incidental mechanism of defense against a threat to living space but is an essential constituent of place identity. Castigating the local housing authority gives residents a means of dealing with implications of their dependence on public housing authority while recognizing that their benefactor is disinvesting its housing stock. It is, in short, a way of expressing an autonomous identity and consciously setting themselves apart from the institution that provides the only means of affordable shelter available to them.[8]

In short, we cannot explain why the urban poor and other marginalized groups act as they do in particular situations without understanding how meanings and interpretations of space play a major role in shaping those situations. Different strategies of using space function as a means of neutralizing externally imposed social identities on the one hand, and cultivating and asserting autonomous personal identities on the other. When residents 'use space' they are not merely producing spaces, they are also consuming them as symbols of security, safety and a host of other meanings that are subject to constant challenge by housing authority officials and residents themselves, many of whom have widely different ideas of what a place should be. The above points suggest that we can explain adaptation and resistance through processes of place identity construction (e.g. identity embracement and disavowal). By itself, the trope of adaptation lacks specificity in analyzing what groups are adapting to, why they are adapting, and how adaptation is maintained over time. By itself, the trope of resistance cannot explain why some the poor people seek out others and construct spaces of safety and security, why some withdraw and avoid contact with others, why others engage in criminal behavior, and why others join together and collectively organize. The advantage of the concept 'using space' is that it provides an analytical and empirical basis for understanding the spatial aspects of action among the urban poor. It also suggests how we might remedy the problems of adaptation and resistance models of poor peoples' agency.

First, different spatial meanings and locations help shape particular forms of action — adaptation, resistance, and so on. Spatial meanings establish performative codes that relate particular forms of action and modes of interaction to specific settings. Agency is intrinsically social and spatial since it involves the engagement and disengagement by actors of the different spatial environments. The recent ethnographic research of Pattillo-McCoy (1998) on black church culture and Haney (1996) on gendered practices of state institutions draw attention to how different strategies of social action and cultural practices are connected to different spaces in the city. The black church, according to Pattillo-McCoy (1998: 768), 'influences the script and staging of organizational efforts in black communities' that provide a cultural 'tool kit' (Swidler, 1986) of prayer, call-and-response structure, and Christian spirituality. Haney (1996: 774) shows that patterns of institutional control and resistance by women within the juvenile justice system entail different situational constraints and possibilities that are located in specific times and places. Venkatesh's (1997) ethnography of the corporatization of urban gang activity in a Midwestern US city, and Wright's (1997) comparative study of homeless mobilizations in San Jose and Chicago, draw attention to how contested meanings of particular spaces are critical in establishing a foundation for collective action and political mobilization. The diverse work of these and other scholars suggests that social action, collective identity and cultural practices are

8 Several studies show how the urban poor often engage in various forms of 'identity work' to resist stigma, marginalization and degradation. Distancing talk and behavior, where individuals distance themselves from imposed categories (categorical distancing), social roles (role distancing) and organizations (institutional distancing), is an important form of social action of subordinate groups that forms part of their repertoire of tactical resistance. Wagner (1993) shows how homeless encampment members in a northern US city distanced themselves from other homeless individuals' behaviors and roles, and developed alternative meanings of family and work to resist marginalization. Wright (1997: 267) notes how homeless persons in San Jose and Chicago distanced themselves from shelter staff to counter negative labels and low status.

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embedded in particular spaces and have a spatial component that, in turn, influences subsequent action.

Second, the ways in which the urban poor understand their own relationship to space *makes a difference* to their actions and identities. Public housing residents act and behave differently in different spatial locations which entail different situational constraints and possibilities. Residents embed these constraints and possibilities in their practical knowledge that they then draw upon to clarify motives, goals, intentions and appropriate courses of action. In spite of the dilapidation and insecurity around them, public housing residents actively reproduce as well as transform their daily lives in response to the demands and contingencies of the present. The fact that their voices take place in public housing space and are a comment about that space resonates with Lefebvre's (1991: 132) observation that 'discourses *about* space' influence and direct action to the extent that they are 'discourses *of* space'. Using this conceptual framework, adaptation models could direct attention to the kinds of spatial meanings that people use to orient themselves to unfamiliar and changing surroundings. In addition, resistance models could sensitize us to how meanings of space shared by particular groups of people can spearhead opposition to existing social structures and build collective action. Furthermore, 'neighborhood effects' could be explained through processes of place identity embracement and disavowal, not social 'disorganization' or 'dysfunction'.[9]

Finally, spatial meanings are both products of human interaction and producers of certain forms of human interaction. As a system of meaning, space is both constraining and enabling. Space shapes and conditions how individuals and groups think and conceive of themselves, contest as well as reinforce social inequalities. The implication is that the content and political force of individual and group action is intimately bound up with the meanings and symbols people attach to particular spaces. The advantage of the 'using space' heuristic is that it shifts the conception of spatiality from geographical scale or container of action to space as meaningful social production and object of struggle. Put simply, human practices and institutions create space even as space helps to create those practices and institutions (Giddens, 1984). By stressing the recursive relation of space to other social entities, this approach motivates a much more intense consideration of how spatial meanings play a role in shaping social organization, cultural representations and more 'global' (i.e. 'macro') processes of social change. Spatial issues are not ontologically distant or 'outside' the analysis of the social. Definitions of space are a social process bound up with questions such as: How do people construct space? Why and how do people assign deep meaning and social power to space (localities, regions, states, communities, and so on)? How do people experience space as a material artifact? How do people represent space in discourse? And how do they use space as a political strategy to challenge ascribed status distinctions and outsiders' imposed social designations?

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to advance understanding of the spatiality of poor people's agency. One's conceptualization of sociological terms such as agency, structure, culture, globalization, and so on, profoundly shape what one chooses to study, how the

9 Viewing neighborhood effects through a spatial lens would help us move beyond the idea that causal linkages exist between neighborhood context (geographical space), individual behavior and social outcomes. Many poor areas possess dense and sophisticated networks that help residents cope with social exclusion and marginality (for a recent empirical study, see Devine and Sams-Abiodun, 2001). Out-of-wedlock childrearing may not be deviant in communities with many extended family and friendship networks. As many studies have shown, neighborhood-based social practices are important components of peoples' cultural and place identity. They should not be condemned as morally degenerate nor summarily dismissed as pathological.

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analysis proceeds and the results of the research. Many scholars recognize the importance of space but few have formulated a theoretically-informed approach to studying it. We can characterize most of what passes for theories of agency and poverty as essentially spaceless, because most theorists conceive social relations as operating within a space. Seen in this way, space becomes reified as a container of otherwise exogenous social processes rather than an independent set of productive forces. While devoting much attention to theorizing time, scholars have indicted sociological theory for its exclusion of spatial issues, for failing to develop the conceptual tools to analyze the new conjunctions of time and space within modernity (Giddens, 1979; Soja, 1989). According to Soja (1994: 128): 'Space still tends to be treated as fixed, dead, undialectical; time as richness, life, dialectic, the revealing context for critical social theorization'. This article has attempted to remedy this absence by offering an alternative conceptualization, problematizing the more conventional and often implicit approaches to space in urban poverty research, and showing how the reconceptualization of space as social process and meaningful construction can offer insights into understanding poor people's agency.

Comprehending the spatiality of social life encourages and enables us to fashion spatially informed sociological explanations that are not just a restatement of social action taking place in space (i.e. reference to space as context, background or setting). As explanation becomes permeated with spatiality, processes and concepts themselves become increasingly spatialized. To paraphrase Isaac (1997: 10), a good sociological explanation of how and why a social process unfolds, or operates, requires a 'sociological structured logic' that is itself grounded in the temporal and spatial realities of social life. This is so because social life not only occurs in 'temporal regimes' but also in 'spatial regimes' that structure, order and regulate human lives. Just as 'we are not only *in* temporal orders (clocks, schedules etc.)' (p.10, emphasis in original), we are not just *in* spatial orders (homes, neighborhoods, cities, etc.). Both spatiality and temporality structure, even dominate, social life and are internal to social 'structuring' (Abrams, 1982). This focus on spatiality promises important insights into the spatial conditions, characteristics and attributes of social organization and social processes. The aim of this effort is to enable specific local (time/place) conditions of social organization to play a role in a mode of explanation that recognizes that small and ostensibly insignificant actions can produce wide-ranging and long-lasting spatial effects. It also suggests that we think of the production of space as an ontological process.

Finally, taking space seriously means transforming our notions of relations among, and content of, time, causality and narrative. Particular social features of socio-historical processes are dependent upon, or sensitive to, local, spatially-based actions, events and conditions. Understanding the explanatory links between processes, macrostructures and local conditions suggests a move away from conventional causality rooted in orderly, homogeneous, continuous, and additive linear metaphors that emphasize universality and predictive law (for overviews, see Gotham and Staples, 1996; Lobao, 1996). It also suggests that we recognize the limitations of top-down deductive theorizing and aspatial (and atemporal) covering law models (Lobao, 1996; 2002). The implication is that we should understand causality as 'conjunctive combinations' (Ragin, 1987), sequences of events (Abbott, 1990; 1992), and 'joint complexes of categories in which additivity has no real meaning' (Isaac, 1997: 7). In this formulation, social 'change' appears as discontinuous, indeterminate and open, and social 'stability' as temporary, fleeting and ephemeral. Such an approach has the additional merit of placing the discussion of agency with the context of its own historicity and spatiality. While viewing agency as a spatial phenomenon does not in itself resolve all problems, it can at least help to give empirical studies a more adequate theoretical grounding.

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