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**Opening Doors Upstairs:  
Networks and Social Capital among Ipanema Doormen**

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The New School

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# **Opening Doors Upstairs: Networks and Social Capital among Ipanema Doormen**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Under what circumstances do people at the bottom of the social ladder form resource-rich ties with people at the top? The current literature linking social capital to stratification assumes that social distance, measured in terms of wealth and status, negatively impacts the formation of resource-rich ties. To test this assumption, I interviewed doormen and residents of an upper-class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. There was, in fact, a consistent pattern of doormen engaging in resource-rich relationships with affluent residents. A culture of paternalism has enabled certain individuals to bridge the socioeconomic divide, although this culture is being eroded by external institutions that are formalizing doormen's work. The study shows how culture and external institutions interact to enable or hinder bridging ties across large social distances.



## **Opening Doors Upstairs: Networks and Social Capital among Ipanema Doormen**

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### **Introduction**

Rivaldo and Heitor are both in their late 40s, and they live and work in an affluent neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil<sup>1</sup>. The men are the doormen of two apartment buildings four blocks apart on the same street -- the *Orleans*, a five-story building with a white marble façade, and the *Santa Gertrudes*, a corner building topped by a penthouse with a wraparound garden. Rivaldo lives with his wife and their two children in a one-room flat behind the lobby where he works. Heitor shares with his common-law wife and their teenaged son a cramped studio at the back of the garage of the *Santa Gertrudes*. Both men live in the midst of people who earn, on average, nine times their salaries.

Despite the socioeconomic chasm separating Rivaldo and Heitor from most of their neighbors, there is an important difference in the two men's ability to tap into social ties for information and resources -- in other words, their respective stocks of social capital. Most of Rivaldo's friends in the neighborhood are fellow low-income workers -- doormen, custodians, domestic workers, waiters, and busboys. Yet over the years Rivaldo

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<sup>1</sup> All names, addresses, building names, and other identifying information have been altered to assure the confidentiality of the interviewees and their families.

has also cultivated a relationship with one of the residents of the *Orleans* that hardly conforms to the roles of employer and employee as stipulated in Rivaldo's work contract. *Doutor* Ernani, as Rivaldo calls the retired lawyer on the third floor<sup>2</sup>, helped Rivaldo and Marisa finance the construction of their own two-room home in the city periphery by providing them with an interest-free loan, installments of which he then subtracted from Rivaldo's monthly paycheck over the next five years. For his part, Rivaldo helped *Doutor* Ernani to find contractors for odd jobs around his apartment, and otherwise remained "at their beck and call even during my off-hours."

The one significant difference between Rivaldo's and Heitor's social ties, in other words, is that Heitor's network is confined to other individuals of low socioeconomic background, whereas Rivaldo's includes a cross-class tie granting him access to benefits he normally would have had little chance of securing. What might account for this difference between the two men's access to social capital? Is the relationship between Rivaldo and Ernani the product of individual-level traits -- a mutual willingness to cross class lines -- or are there contextual factors that enable such a tie?

Examining the relationship between affluent residents of Ipanema and the doormen who guard their lobbies has broader implications for understanding how social distances affect social capital. To phrase the issue more broadly: Can people at the bottom of the social ladder form resource-rich ties with people at the top? And, if so, under what circumstances do these ties appear? The current literature linking social capital to

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<sup>2</sup> Doormen usually address male residents using the honorifics *Seu* ("Mr.") or *Doutor* ("Doctor") and female residents as *Dona* ("Mrs.") or *Doutora* ("Doctor").

stratification assumes that social distance, measured in terms of wealth and status, negatively impacts the formation of resource-rich ties. This assumption yields the prediction that, because of the socioeconomic gulf between residents and doormen, residential proximity would generate no pattern in cross-class ties. This would be particularly true of Ipanema, with its dramatic disparities between affluent residents and their low-income residential employees. Rather than taking the effect of social distance on social capital as a given, this study treats it as an empirical question. Precisely because of its glaring social inequalities, Ipanema is used as a strategic research site for testing the proposition that extreme social distance precludes the formation of cross-class ties.

In a nutshell, the findings contradict this prediction: there is, in fact, a consistent pattern of doormen engaging in resource-rich relationships with affluent residents. An analysis of these transactions reveals how culture and external institutions interact to enable or hinder bridging ties across large social distances. In Ipanema, a culture of paternalism enables certain doormen and residents to bridge the socioeconomic divide, although this is accomplished through highly asymmetric relationships. Over the last two decades, this culture of paternalism has been eroded by external institutions (the doormen's union and real estate management firms) that have professionalized doormen's work.

### **Networks and Social Capital**

The approach undertaken in this paper borrows from recent efforts to reconcile two concepts that have received extensive yet often separate attention in the sociological literature -- social capital and social networks. The body of work on social capital is both

vast and diverse, but assorted interpretations define social capital as a set of competitive advantages arising out of relationships between individuals (Burt 1983).

Two broad traditions conceptualize social capital at different levels of analysis (Portes 1998). The macro perspective treats social capital as a diffuse and generally beneficial quality arising out of social ties and analyzes its origins and consequences in a particular community or country (e.g. Putnam 2000). This perspective recognizes that there are different types of social capital with different effects -- bonding social capital reinforces within-group homogeneity, and bridging social capital links individuals across social boundaries (Putnam 2000). However, the focus on association at an aggregate level tends to obscure the relationship between individuals, their networks, and the institutional contexts in which those networks are nested.

Rather than taking this bird's-eye-view perspective as my point of departure, I will draw from the micro tradition of social capital analysis. This second tradition treats social capital as a potential mechanism for individual mobility requiring, much like other forms of capital, active investment and strategizing (Bourdieu 1980). Refining this definition, other scholars have stressed that not all social capital is alike, distinguishing for instance between social capital arising out of enforceable trust versus bounded solidarity (Portes 1998). Other studies have elucidated how individuals' social capital depends on the specific characteristics of the social ties available to them, including the strength of ties and the degree of closure in a network (Granovetter 1983, 1974, Coleman 1990). Yet benefits are not evenly distributed across a given network; discontinuities allow some

individuals to bridge disparate social circles and broker information across actors at opposite ends of “structural holes” (Burt 1983).

Since society is stratified by differences in accessibility and control of resources, social ties connecting an individual to a higher socioeconomic stratum may provide key opportunities for upward mobility by granting him access to otherwise inaccessible resources (Lin 1990, 1982). However, the focus on homophily has led to the assumption that similar social position, whether measured by economic resources, status, or political power, entails similar access to resources obtained through social ties. Little attention has been paid to explaining how bridging ties emerge despite the segregating forces of homophily and social distance. Yet there is reason to believe that social distance is not an overwhelming deterrent to cross-class tie formation. Not only do empirical studies like those by Granovetter and Burt show that bridging ties do form across disparate social circles, the growing literature on patronage networks explores the entrepreneurial behavior of groups occupying ambiguous structural locations or attempting to cross structural divides (Blok 1974, Padgett and Ansell 1993, McLean 1998).

Recent work on social networks has focused more on how social ties are used than on how they develop in the first place. In contrast, an older tradition of network analysis, building on pioneering yet often overlooked work by European anthropologists, paid greater attention to the transactions that yield social ties rather than taking social networks as primary (Mitchell 1974, Boissevain 1974). Rescuing this transactionalist approach to networks offers renewed possibilities for understanding social capital.



To understand the extent to which social distance impacts the formation of resource-rich social ties, I chose a research site where social distances between two easily discernible groups are extreme. In the neighborhood of Ipanema, doormen of low socioeconomic status live in an urban area where most residents are affluent. A recurring pattern of cross-class ties in such an extreme setting would mean that factors other than proximity in the social structure impact the formation of resource-rich ties.

### **Doormen and Residents of Ipanema**

The upscale neighborhood of Ipanema occupies 1.6 square kilometers of a narrow isthmus bounded on two sides by steep rocky hills, and on the other two by water -- the Atlantic Ocean and a manmade lagoon. A narrow canal cuts across this strip, separating Ipanema from equally affluent Leblon. Most of Ipanema is laid out in a Cartesian grid of 47 large rectangular blocks. The main artery runs parallel to the beach and is lined with stores and restaurants. The remaining streets are largely residential.

Ipanema's orderly layout contrasts with the more haphazard arrangements of *favelas* (shantytowns) perching on the hillsides that flank the neighborhood. Official statistics reflect the area's extreme class polarization: an Ipanema head of household earns roughly nine times the income of his favela counterpart and has on average six more years of schooling (IBGE 2000). However, aggregate statistics mask the presence of roughly 800 Ipanema families whose socioeconomic characteristics match those of favela residents, yet who live interspersed among the city's wealthiest inhabitants. These are the families

of the doormen who guard the entrances of apartment buildings and who receive, as part of their job benefits, rent-free housing in the buildings where they work.

In addition to the doormen and their families, waiters, custodians, domestic workers, electricians, street vendors, car parkers, and a myriad of other low-income workers sustain Ipanema's formal, informal, and domestic economies. These various occupations entail different levels of contact with the neighborhood's affluent residents. For this study, I focus on the neighborhood's live-in doormen, because they constitute the only group of residents whose workplace relations have undergone significant professionalization over the past two decades. This process of formalization presents an opportunity to track the influence of changing institutional context on the doormen's personal networks.

The two institutions primarily responsible for this transformation are the doormen's local union and a small number of real estate management firms. Rio de Janeiro's Union of Building Employees (here referred to as "Doormen's Union") was founded in the mid-1950s, but its membership rolls grew substantially in the early 1980s, when Brazil's military regime was replaced by civilian rule and the union was able to expand labor benefits for its members. The union now offers a wide range of social services, health plans, professional training, and legal aid to over 70,000 members, including most Ipanema doormen. During the same period that the Union bolstered its membership, residential buildings in Ipanema increasingly outsourced their own administration, including personnel management, to specialized real estate management firms.

Traditionally, residents elect from their own midst a superintendent in charge of closely supervising building employees. In most Ipanema buildings, a superintendent is still elected from among the residents themselves, but the superintendent's role in personnel management has dwindled to that of a go-between for residents and management firms.

This study focuses on the doormen's personal networks and experiences, with special attention paid to their interaction with building residents. While this focus sacrifices insight into the influence of actors other than doormen and residents, it allows for a detailed comparison of network formation practices among individuals who occupy nearly identical structural positions near the bottom of the social pyramid. To enhance comparability, I restricted the sample of doormen to those who were granted living quarters in the building where they worked. This means they were either the building's only doorman or its "head doorman"; I excluded night-shift doormen, because their workload, work hours, and contact with residents all vary widely.

I conducted the interviews for this study during four visits to the site, from 2002 to 2004. During the first two visits, I interviewed one live-in doorman on each of the neighborhood's 47 main blocks. These interviews were designed to capture the history and composition of the doormen's social networks and to discern how the doormen tap into different ties for resources. The interviews lasted a mean of 80 minutes, and all but three were tape-recorded. I, a light-skinned Brazilian female, conducted all interviews at different times of the day, approaching doormen on each block until I found one willing to be interviewed (five doormen declined to participate). Usually I interviewed the

doormen and their relatives in or outside the lobbies where the doormen worked, often accompanying them on errands about the building, and occasionally I was taken on an impromptu tour of the building's facilities and of respondents' living quarters.

During a third visit to the site, I revisited some of the doormen for follow-up interviews and administered to a subsample of 15 randomly chosen respondents from the previous wave a name-generator instrument. The instrument asked each interviewee to state how many individuals he knew by name from a variety of professions ranging widely in socioeconomic status, and how often they interacted. Respondents were also asked to list the people they would turn to in a series of hypothetical crisis scenarios. In addition, I interviewed five doormen's wives, four doormen's grown children, two officers from the local Doormen's Union, and managers at two of the neighborhood's largest real estate management firms.

The backgrounds of the doormen respondents matched descriptions culled from secondary sources of rural-urban migrants from Brazil's authoritarian period. The earliest arrivals in Rio came to the city in the late 1960s, when industrial growth around São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro unleashed a torrent of migrants from the arid hinterland of the Northeast (Deak and Schiffer 1999). With only two exceptions, all doormen interviewed for this study were *nordestinos* (Northeasterners). They hailed, more specifically, from a remote rural region just south of the drought-plagued São Francisco River, where the state of Ceará borders those of Paraíba and Pernambuco. They had a mean of 2.5 years

of formal schooling<sup>3</sup>, came from families with an average of 8 surviving children, and began working (typically in subsistence farming) at the mean age of 11. All respondents were male<sup>4</sup>, and most were either Caucasian or of mixed ethnic ancestry.

In the final wave of research, I constructed a snowball sample of 15 affluent residents, interspersed throughout the neighborhood, starting from two key informants I had met on previous trips. Interviews with residents lasted a mean of 75 minutes and were conducted either at their apartments or in nearby coffeeshops. Residents included owners of beachfront luxury apartments and young professionals living in relatively no-frills buildings. All, however, belonged to households within the city's top 5% income category. Of the 15 residents interviewed, eight owned the apartments where they lived, and four had served as building superintendent at one time or another. They had a mean of 13.5 years of schooling, and a mean household income in the 80,000-90,000 *reais* range. The sample comprised both sexes and a variety of ages. These descriptive statistics show that, rather than a continuum in socioeconomic backgrounds, a socioeconomic chasm separates Ipanema's affluent residents and their doormen.

### **Upstairs and Downstairs**

José Aparecido, a stocky man with sea-green eyes who had worked in the same building for 11 years, is head doorman at the *Gallia*. I interviewed him while he swept glossy almond-tree leaves off the sidewalk in front of the building. I asked him how a new arrival in the neighborhood could meet other people in the neighborhood. He stopped

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<sup>3</sup> Illiterate respondents signed research participation consent forms (read aloud by a third party) with a thumbprint.

sweeping and tapped the broomstick on the ground. “The new people who arrive here say, ‘How wonderful to see all these people together. The *nordestino* and the *carioca* [Rio native] sharing the sidewalk.’ But let me tell you, the sidewalk is the only thing we can share here. Because in Ipanema there’s an upstairs and a downstairs. And people like us, we stay downstairs.”

Many of the doormen I interviewed had expressed irritation at being called *paraíba*, a derogatory term for *nordestino*, and two who were darker-skinned had reported having experienced instances of racial prejudice. Yet, in referring to an upstairs and a downstairs, José Aparecido was stressing another dimension of discrimination -- class-based discrimination, which many doormen deemed far more hurtful. “People here call me *paraíba*, but I don’t get heated up over it,” claimed Olegário. “But when someone treats you badly because he has more money -- that is especially hurtful, because we work very hard to earn our living.”

The doormen became especially indignant when they recalled relatives being mistreated. Many of the doormen’s children befriend and play with the children of upper-class residents with little awareness of class differences, only to undergo a rude awakening as they reach adolescence. “There are some children on this street that we saw grow up, and they no longer greet us,” said Francisco. “Nowadays they don’t even look you in the eye, they don’t talk to you. Those kids used to play with my son, right here on the block, but nowadays they don’t speak to him even when they cross him in the street.” In addition,

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<sup>4</sup> During my research I only heard of one *doorwoman*. She had gotten the job through unusual circumstances: her husband had been the building’s head doorman, and after his death the residents invited her to replace him.

the doormen and their families are often made to feel out of place in neighborhood establishments, many of which have institutionalized implicit or overt forms of class-based discrimination. Several of the older doormen said that, despite having lived in the neighborhood for decades and having brought up their children there, they had never quite felt like they belonged in Ipanema. Severino traced this feeling back to an incident from his early days as an Ipanema doorman: “There used to be a pizza place here on Farme de Amoedo Street. One day there were twenty minutes left until the end of my workday, and I was hungry, so I thought, ‘I’m going to order a pizza and a Coca-Cola.’ So I called the pizzeria. A man picked up and I asked, ‘Can you deliver a pizza here [at my address]?’ And he answered, ‘With whom am I speaking?’ I told him, ‘I’m the doorman’. And he said: ‘We don’t deliver pizzas for doormen’ and hung up.” After his workday ended, Severino walked over to the pizzeria and extracted an apology from the manager, but he had never forgotten the episode. “It still upsets me,” he said, his face flushing. “Because our money is all the same, isn’t it?”

The alienation created by episodic and institutionalized forms of discrimination magnifies social distances already established through differences in material resources and status. This widespread discrimination seems to support the hypothesis, derived from current thinking about social distance and social capital, that any significant tie between a doorman and a resident would be little more than a social fluke.

### **A Culture of Paternalism**

Francisco is a short, stocky man of fifty-three with olive skin and calloused hands. When I first met him, Francisco had just embarked on his fourth decade as a doorman in the lobby of *The Bellagio*. Francisco spends ten hours a day, six days a week, monitoring the lobby and parking cars in the building's underground garage. In the mornings he also sweeps the sidewalk and sorts the mail -- a task he accomplishes by deciphering the apartment numbers, since he never learned the letters of the alphabet. In the afternoons he is occasionally called upon to make small, low-risk repairs around the building, caulking windows and fixing leaks.

Francisco's trajectory to the *Bellagio* began in the arid backcountry of Ceará, where he grew up the second oldest of nine children born to a subsistence farmer and his seamstress wife. In the late 1960s, hoping for a salaried job, Francisco and a younger brother boarded a *pau-de-arara*, a rickety bus crowded with migrants that skirted the Atlantic coast down to Rio de Janeiro. Francisco and his brother followed in the tracks of two older cousins who years before had settled in a Rio slum. "I was twenty, but I couldn't read or write," he explained. "The only job my cousin could find for me was at a construction site here in Ipanema, hauling bricks." The work was hard and the pay low, but once the building was finished Francisco's luck improved: "The contractor asked me to stay on as a night guard while the apartments were being sold. Then, when residents began moving in, I was promoted to doorman." He was given a small but steady salary, his first ID card, and rent-free housing in a single room tucked between the lobby and the machinery room.



After a few years working at the *Bellagio*, Francisco met and married Socorro, a fellow migrant who worked as a housecleaner. When I visited Francisco at the *Bellagio*, their tidy one-room apartment was set up in the same way they had arranged it after their only son, Pedro, was born. A pair of heavy drapes hung on a tight nylon cord split the room; on one side Francisco and his wife shared a bunkbed, and on the other side their son slept in his own bed, next to a small kitchen area and a cramped white-tiled bathroom.

Pedro is seldom home during the day. In the mornings and afternoons he works as a paid intern in a businessman's election campaign for the local chamber of deputies, and at night he studies toward his bachelor's degree in business. Pedro's childhood had been radically different from his parents': he had graduated from a private school attended by the children of lawyers, doctors, and other elite professionals. "Just the [annual] tuition is four times what I make in one year," Francisco said. He told me that Pedro started studying there in kindergarten after Beatriz, the owner of the school and a resident of the *Bellagio*, waived his tuition -- "as long as he got good grades," added Francisco emphatically. When I first interviewed Francisco, all three family members were pooling money to pay the portion of the university tuition not covered by Pedro's student loans. In addition, both Francisco and Socorro made themselves available to help Beatriz's family in any way they could -- Francisco moonlighted as her driver, and Socorro had until recently worked three days a week cleaning Beatriz's father's apartment.

The family's story, although idiosyncratic in the extent of its intergenerational mobility, illustrates the uneasy perch between poverty and affluence in which Ipanema doormen

must negotiate their family's social position. Francisco and Socorro's combined monthly income of 600 *reais* falls below the mean household income for the two nearest favelas; although the doormen do not pay rent, Francisco estimates that "even if I earned twice my salary now, we could only afford to rent the smallest shack in Rocinha."

Despite the socioeconomic gap between them and most families in Ipanema, Francisco and his family are hardly socially isolated in their neighborhood. The extent of Francisco's social ties became apparent as I sat with him during his lunch break: he exchanged pleasantries with the mailman, who lingered on his route to chat; a fellow doorman from across the street, and a street vendor pulling a cart full of sweets. Among Francisco's many social ties, however, it is his bond with Beatriz that stands out, because it places Francisco squarely at the juncture of two sets of networks that overlap geographically yet remain segregated in their intimate social lives. What, then, accounts for Francisco's unusual bond with Beatriz?

Francisco's access to social capital -- reflected in the composition of his personal network -- is partly a result of his status as a *nordestino* migrant in a society marked by extreme socioeconomic inequality. Francisco and his brother decided to try their luck in Rio largely because cousins and friends had already settled in the city. Theirs was a typical migrant trajectory: of the 47 doormen interviewed, 40 said that having relatives, friends, and acquaintances in Rio was a significant factor in their decision to move there. Eventually, the doormen vastly expand their social ties through their jobs. "I know every doorman and nightguard and custodian on this block," said Severino, pointing up and

down the street, “and most of the employees on the neighboring blocks.” Eliomar, a balding man with a deeply furrowed brow, had worked almost as many years in his building. “I came in 1960, and I thought I would move on. But I kept on staying, kept on staying. And when you grow old together in the same place, you get to know everybody.”

The doormen’s migrant ties, expanded through work-related contacts, coalesce into a close-knit social network that is geographically centered in Ipanema, stretching from one end of the neighborhood to the other. The doormen interviewed typically knew by name every doorman on his block, most colleagues on adjoining blocks, and a handful of others on blocks further down the street in each direction. Although during the workday the doormen seldom venture far from their buildings, during their free time they mingle in a variety of social settings: “We play soccer on the beach,” said Eliomar. “We attend the services at the church on the square. [...] It’s not hard for us to make friends here in Ipanema, because there are so many *nordestinos*.”

Despite their proximity to affluent citizens, though, the doormen’s social network is marked by a pronounced class homogeneity: its members are drawn almost exclusively from very low socioeconomic strata. The name-generator questionnaire administered to a sub-sample of 15 doormen scattered throughout Ipanema confirms the network’s high socioeconomic homophily. Asked to identify the people to whom they would feel most comfortable turning to for help in case of a financial crisis, health problem, and sudden job loss, the doormen named fellow doormen, construction workers, street vendors, domestic employees, truck drivers, street cleaners, restaurant workers, and agricultural

laborers. Despite having lived continuously in Ipanema for an average of 11 years, the other residents of the neighborhood listed by the respondents were usually other doormen and domestic employees, all of whom lived in spaces they neither owned nor rented but rather which they were allowed to inhabit temporarily as part of their job benefits.

Some of the doormen, however, did mention individuals of high socioeconomic status. Januário, the head doorman at the *Vivaldi*, named a lawyer when asked whom he would turn to in case of crisis. I asked him why he felt he could count on her. He told me that a couple of years after he had started working at the *Vivaldi*, he was sitting at his desk and suddenly doubled over in pain from what turned out to be a kidney stone. Renata, a lawyer who then lived on the third floor apartment, happened to walk in shortly afterwards and ended up accompanying Januário to the hospital. “I had to get emergency medical treatment at Miguel Couto [a public hospital], and because Dona Renata knew people there, I didn’t have to wait in line. She came along and got the doctor to see me right away.” I asked Januário if the incident had changed his relationship with Renata. “I think it did,” he replied. “She’s helping me with other things. She gives me a lot of advice about payments and legal issues. She has never charged me for anything. I am planning to file a lawsuit, and she said she is going to help me prepare it.”

Januário’s relationship with Renata brought his family benefits that they otherwise would not be able to access, either because they lacked the financial means (for private legal assistance) or because they lacked the necessary personal contacts (for bypassing the hospital waitlist). In exchange, Januário made himself available on weekends and during

his off-hours to drive her around and run errands for Renata's family. He was paid for these side jobs, he told me, but he felt that, in his own way, he was providing the family with a scarce resource -- access to trustworthy workers. "You have to really trust someone to let him drive your family around," he said. "You can't just hire anyone."

Clearly, some doormen had established resource-rich ties with residents. These relationships are characterized by sustained, if unbalanced, exchanges of favors between doorman and resident, as well as by the unusual benefits that the doormen and their families garner through those ties. Of the 40 doormen interviewed for this study, 11 had formed a bond with a resident that unambiguously involved regular exchanges of favors beyond the contractual relationship between employer and employee. These cross-class ties entailed a certain degree of reciprocity that was absent from the far more commonplace instances of one-sided assistance or charity.

Leonardo, for example, regularly received help from a resident. Leonardo's daughter, Patricia, was in third grade, and Leonardo lamented that because neither he nor his wife had studied past the first grade, they could not help her with homework. He commented that despite their own lack of schooling, Patricia had learned to read even before she entered kindergarten. "There's a resident here who taught her," Leonardo explained. "I think he is a schoolteacher. Sometimes he sits with her in the lobby and helps her with her homework. Even when she was only this big—"he lowers his hand to mid-thigh -- "he would show her books and teach her the letters." Leonardo, for his part, could only reciprocate by "being extra polite to him." Such relationships yield sporadic benefits for

the doormen and their families, but they lack the sustained exchanges that characterize cross-class ties like those of Francisco and Januário.

Cross-class ties between doormen and residents are consistent with paternalistic practices that are widespread in Brazil and which have been documented by social scientists, some of whom trace the origins of these practices to the paternalism of certain slave-master relationships, a dynamic that has persisted in milder form between employers and employees, particularly in the domestic realm (Freyre 1946, Diniz 1982). Paternalistic relationships instill the expectation that the employer is not just one's contractual counterpart, but also the guarantor of one's security. The employer's position as a benevolent, parental figure may grant him social control of employees by maintaining their dependence on him. Both Leonardo and Francisco used the expression "I don't know what we would do without her" to sum up their relationships with benefactor residents. In addition to expressing gratitude and relief, they were revealing their dependence on those residents. This culture of paternalism helps certain doorman-resident pairs to overcome the segregating forces of structural position. Therefore two doormen may occupy equivalent structural positions yet have very different social resources they can draw upon. The next section explores the content of doormen's transactions, as well as their subjective understandings of those interactions.

### **Navigating Asymmetries**

Previous studies of social capital have linked the flow of information and resources across social ties to the strength of those ties, using measures such as frequency of

contact, most recent interaction, or subjective labeling (e.g. "close friend", "acquaintance") as indicators of intimacy: the level of interaction and commitment between social actors. The doormen's experiences show that the resourcefulness of a social tie is not simply a function of its strength/weakness, but also of the content of that relationship -- the social actors' understanding of the tie that binds them. A comparison of doormen's within-class and cross-class ties reveals that qualitative differences between those two kinds of ties influence the flow of resources across those ties.

The doormen of Ipanema speak proudly of their camaraderie and collective resourcefulness, forged in part through the common experience of migration. Newcomers learn the ropes from veterans, collecting information about how to navigate the city, where to go for leisure, and on which day of the week the street fair comes to the square. As Manuel pointed out, "When you can't even read the street signs, you have to ask other people to help you with everything." A strong norm of reciprocity emerges that also shapes work-related interaction between doormen. Januário told me he often relies on colleagues for loans of small, urgently needed supplies. "The doormen here, we are like the taxi drivers -- we help each other out. If someone needs a lightbulb, he'll ask another doorman, 'Can you please get me a lightbulb?', and the guy will get one for him."

Since most members of the doormen's network belong to a common socioeconomic stratum, the resources (goods, services, and information) they mobilize through these ties tend to be highly redundant, in the sense that they can be obtained through multiple network ties. As Raimundo de Sá put it, "We help each other as we can, and if at that

moment we can't help you than for sure someone else will. I can walk down this block and buzz my friend at number 56, and if he isn't in I can try number 58, and if I can't find him I'll go across the street to 61." This redundancy means that a doorman can turn to many different people for something he needs -- thus, he is not highly dependent on any one individual for that resource. The flip side is that those people's resources will not differ dramatically from his own. As a result, within-class ties are likelier to help the doorman to maintain his family's social standing than to trigger dramatic improvement.

Because of the redundancy of resources, favor exchanges between individuals of similar socioeconomic status involve minor power shifts that that can be quickly redressed by returning favors. The cumulative effect of such exchanges, when reciprocated, is that they cement the bond of trust between individuals. In contrast, most doormen seem to go out of their way -- often at their own expense -- to avoid confrontations with building residents, even when doing so means forfeiting compensation or enduring unjust treatment. They don't resign themselves to these conditions simply because they are accustomed to exploitation and discrimination. All the doormen interviewed were members of the union and were aware that it offers legal assistance for doormen seeking to redress unfair working conditions. At a purely pragmatic level, many doormen put up with unfair conditions to minimize the risk of getting fired. As several interviewees noted, the consequences of being fired from a doorman job easily surpass the corresponding loss of income. The rent-free housing, in particular, is regarded as a mixed blessing. "You should never depend on the [rent-free] housing," said Severino. "Because if one day you lose your job, you don't just lose your job, you lose your



housing too. And then where do you go? You take your family, your children who have grown up in Ipanema, who are used to this peace and safety, to live in the slums?” The deep fear of leaving their families homeless virtually overnight is confirmed by experiences such as that of Ney: “In my last job I had an altercation with one of the residents, and he had me fired. Suddenly I didn’t have anywhere to go. I didn’t have a house of my own. I had to rent a shack up there—he nodded toward a nearby favela—“and the four of us lived in one room for three months until I found another job in Ipanema. That’s how my children found out what a life of luxury they have down here.”

Home ownership represents a financial safety net for the entire family. Severino had already built his house, but he often heard about building residents who used their doorman’s financial vulnerability to stifle complaints about exploitative working conditions: “Some residents really throw it in your face. They’ll threaten the doorman that he is going to lose his job over the smallest things. Because they know that the only place the doorman can take his family is back to the *barraco* [shack].” The power held by residents over doormen surpasses the formal authority granted by the role of employer; the wide gap in resources available to the two groups gives the former tremendous leverage in dictating the terms of their relationship even beyond its contractual bounds.

Doormen who have established cross-class ties must also deal with these permanent power asymmetries when mobilizing those ties for resources that would otherwise not be available to them. Yet the doormen and their families seldom behave as passive recipients of charity. Rather, they pour great energy into coming up with ways to

reciprocate the extra-contractual benefits of paternalistic relationships, not only to sustain those ties but also to maintain their personal dignity.

In the absence of significant material resources, the doormen tap into non-material assets.

“What I can offer in return,” said Eliomar of his rapport with a resident, “is my own *conhecimento*. Because someone like *seu* Jorge needs trusted people to fix problems in his apartment, to hang new blinds or retile the bathroom. The residents don’t like to hire just anyone for these jobs, because they have lots of valuable things in their apartments. So *seu* Jorge can come to me and I’ll recommend him someone who is trustworthy, because I know this person myself.” Eliomar, in other words, repaid Jorge by granting him access to his own social ties, which allowed Jorge to find trustworthy contractors and informal workers. Irineu echoed this dynamic from a resident's perspective: "I guess where Jurandir helps me out the most is, say, when I need someone to come in and repaint the walls or hang some curtains. Then he'll call one of his friends, and I don't have to worry about having a stranger in the apartment. I can even go to work and leave him alone in here, and I know that when I come home nothing will be missing."

Residents who have formed cross-class ties with doormen are quick to point out how they too depend on their doormen. "Let's be frank," said Míriam, a retired lawyer who lives alone in a second-floor apartment. "I know I depend on *seu* Vicente. Look at me: I live alone. If something happens to me, *seu* Vicente might be the first one to help me. My sister lives [in another neighborhood]. And she doesn't even have a cell phone. *Seu* Vicente is always around here, either in the lobby or in his apartment. So I know that in a

crisis I might need him." Sílvia, another resident, pointed out the window at a balcony across the street. "My neighbors there were two sisters, and they had -- it was Alzheimer's, I think. They came from a very wealthy family -- owners of a factory. Their doorman, *seu* Joelmo, used to take very good care of them. If one wanted to go out, he would make sure she was never alone. [...] After the two sisters died the family was so grateful that they bought *seu* Joelmo an apartment here in Ipanema. And he still works in the building! And he works hard, too. That man deserves everything he has now."

In contrast to their within-class ties, the doormen's relationships with residents frequently yield resources which under normal circumstances would remain out of reach due to cost or inaccessibility, for instance scholarships and unusual job opportunities. These ties thus grant those doormen resources that are novel rather than redundant. Novel resources can lead to unusual opportunities for individual or intergenerational mobility, but they are usually obtainable through only one rather than multiple ties.

There are also qualitative differences between the doormen's within-class ties and cross-class ties. Whereas Francisco regularly socializes with his fellow doormen and other low-income workers, "Here in the building none of the residents has ever invited us to a birthday party," he said. Desiderio, whose doorman had come to his rescue when he fainted in the kitchen, had described his relationship with Joaquim as a "friendship." Yet, when I prodded him about what he meant by friendship, he replied, "We, it's a symbiotic relationship. We are not friends in the sense that we go out and have a beer together. You know, you draw the line somewhere."

The doormen's cross-class ties thus entail a very different content from their within-class ties. Cross-class ties lack the social intimacy of within-class ties, but these are not simply calculating relationships of exchange. The emotional content of these ties is clearly visible in the constant efforts that doormen make to uphold their dignity in interactions marked by a great power asymmetry.

### **Changing Institutional Context**

If a culture of paternalism enables doormen to bridge social distances set by differences in resources and discrimination, why do only some doormen form cross-class ties?

Among the residents with cross-class ties, no pattern emerges for age, gender, or occupation, yet the doormen with cross-class ties share one salient characteristic: long job tenure. At the time of their first interviews these doormen had accumulated, on average, 17 continuous years in the same job, versus 9 years for the remaining respondents.

One possible explanation for the higher probability of veteran doormen to forge cross-class ties is a simple time effect: veterans have had more opportunities to form resource-rich ties with residents. Yet of the 11 doormen who had formed cross-class ties, 7 reported establishing those relationships of exchange very early on in their jobs (within the first 2 years). That was the case of Francisco of *The Bellagio*, whose son Pedro had attended an exclusive private school because Beatriz had waived his tuition. I asked Francisco how this relationship began. “When Pedro was born, *Dona* Beatriz had just moved here,” said Francisco. “[Pedro] was still just a baby, but she promised him a

scholarship. She took a lot of interest in my son." In addition to cases like that of Francisco, 12 of the individuals who began working as doormen after 1985 have remained in the same job for over nine years without having formed cross-class ties. More than just time seems to impact cross-class tie formation.

Clues as to why cross-class ties emerge only among "veteran" doormen appear when we look beyond individual-level characteristics. More specifically, changes in the institutional context shaping resident-doormen relationships have weakened the culture of paternalism. Not only have institutional changes decreased the opportunities for cross-class interaction, they have also rigidified definitions of employer and employee. These changes can be traced by examining the hiring process in Ipanema buildings. Until the mid-1980s, the hiring process was conducted largely through informal referrals and cemented with a bare-bones contract stipulating only the most basic rights and duties of each party. Eliomar, a 30-year veteran, described the process: "When I arrived [in Rio], getting a doorman job was very, very easy. If a building needed a doorman or custodian, they could just pluck someone off the street. Or one of us [who already had a job] would go call a brother or cousin. He would come in and chat with the superintendent, and if he seemed like a decent man the superintendent would send him off to buy his uniform."

In the 1980s, however, the Doormen's Union bolstered its efforts to professionalize doormen. Formalization of doormen's work did not just enhance doormen's labor rights, it also appealed to the elite's growing demand for employees with formal training in security practices in a city plagued by skyrocketing crime rates. "Nowadays the doorman

can't just sit there and sort the mail, open the door," said Evandro, who sits on the board of the Doormen's Union. "He has to oversee the closed circuit camera and operate the electronic gates. And he has to have some knowledge of security -- he can't just let any delivery boy inside, just like that." Eliomar admitted that safety was a constant concern: "You hear stories about doormen who were killed on the job, and you worry that [the robbers] will come back." Indeed, the same week I interviewed him, two men armed with semi-automatic weapons forced their way into a nearby lobby, tied up the doorman and janitor, and pillaged several apartments before escaping (O Globo, 06/12/02). Around that time, the Doormen's Union formed a partnership with the Military Police to train doormen through live-action simulations of robberies and kidnappings.

Doormen are taking advantage of other services offered by the union. The union's legal department is kept busy assisting doormen who sue employers for overtime and backpay. Residents too are aware of this trend. Célia, who has served as superintendent for three straight years, said, "We've had four or five night-shift doormen leave their jobs here, and every single one sued the building demanding extra pay. We had to settle with all of them." Partly because of the increase in litigation, residential building administration has been increasingly subcontracted to specialized real estate management firms. This effort to unburden residents from administrative tasks minimizes the direct role of residents and superintendents in the building's day-to-day management. Firms offer services ranging from centralized billing and accounting to teams of specialists who remain on call to assist superintendents with troubleshooting. Outsourcing has also transformed the hiring process: in most buildings, personnel management is now delegated to the firms, which

carry out a competitive process and provide basic professional training for new hires. “I was chosen out of eighteen candidates,” boasted Manuel, who was hired in 1999.

Although newer hires tend to have no significant previous experience as doormen, they enter the profession with much greater awareness of the formal regulations defining the resident-doorman relationship. “When I was hired [six years ago], a manager at the real estate firm sat me down and went over all the rules,” said Raimundo de Sa, a rotund man of 30 with a thin moustache. “He explained to me all of my responsibilities, everything that was in the contract, and my rights -- things like work hours and vacations.”

Besides modifying the hiring process, management firms have increasingly taken over routine administrative tasks, decreasing contact between building residents and employees. “It used to be that you approached the residents with just about any problem you encountered in the building, but nowadays the firm deals with a lot of those issues. Even if you want to leave your job you have to talk to the people at the firm,” said Francisco. In many buildings, residents still pick a superintendent to oversee employees, but most administrative procedures are carried out by the management firm. In Sílvia’s building, no one was willing to serve as superintendent. A few years ago, the residents’ committee solved the problem by outsourcing the position altogether to a professional.

As a result of these changes, newer hires are socialized into explicit role definitions of employer and employee, reducing opportunities for the kind of paternalistic arrangements that seep into more improvised work relationships. In fact, newer hires often voice firm

resistance to such arrangements, vilifying paternalism as a corruption of a formally defined relationship. “Some doormen like to improvise as they go, but you can’t do that,” said Raimundo. “If you start to improvise and you stray from the rules, you can open yourself to being exploited.” He reached into his desk drawer. “The union has a newsletter that it circulates every month. [...] It has a lot of information. There is always something about our rights, about what the employers can and can’t do.” He handed me that month’s issue of the *Espigão*, whose feature story outlined the union’s ongoing struggle for a wage raise. Awareness of such issues, disseminated by both the real estate management companies and by the doormen’s union, makes recent hires especially sensitive to deviations from the regulations. As Evandro, the Doormen’s Union officer, said, “Our professional category is very regulated. We still have many battles to fight, some rights we are trying to secure. But we have formalized most aspects of the profession. We have the minimum salary, vacation days, overtime, retirement plans. We even had a law passed here in Rio proclaiming June 29 to be ‘Doorman Day’.”

The distancing created by this formalization was reflected in the doormen’s assessment of residents. Newer hires tended to pigeonhole all residents into a single category and complain of their inaccessibility, even arrogance. “For me they are all the same,” claimed Raimundo. “I treat everyone the same and think of everyone the same.” Luiz makes a conscious effort not to differentiate between residents. “A doorman knows a lot about the lives of the residents, you know. We sit here all day, so we know who comes in when, and with whom. But I just try to do my job here and keep to myself. If there are some residents outside chatting, I try not to listen.” Since the newer doormen see themselves in



well-defined professional roles, they avoid ambiguities by restricting their interaction to professional matters and by sticking to the written rules. The higher degree of professional formality internalized by these newer doormen leads them to perceive rigid class divisions that cannot, and should not, be bridged.

Anderson, doorman at the *Lyon* apartments for nine years, had taught his two daughters that the separation between classes was not only unavoidable but also quite natural. “My daughters are used to living in an area that is, you know, very sophisticated,” he said. “But I have always told them, ‘You two are living in a place that is of a very high social level, a place that is not your reality. This is where I work, and we need to keep things separate. People here are of an extremely high social level.’ I tell them those things early on so that they won’t feel rejected. If they say, ‘Oh, I’m going over to so-and-so’s house, they have everything there’, I will remind them, ‘No, you have to live what was meant for you.’” Anderson believed it was better not to stray from the hierarchy established through the employer-employee relationship, and he extrapolated this perspective to the entire social realm: “Of course there are separations between the residents and the doormen. The relationship is well understood -- there is the employee and the boss, so there has to be a little separation between the two, or else it becomes a big mess.”

In contrast to the newer doormen’s perception of a rigid class division, their veteran colleagues tend to distinguish between different types of residents, noting that their personalities and behaviors vary as much as those of low-income workers. Several of those doormen, for example, complimented certain residents for being “simple people”. I

asked Edivaldo what he meant by a “simple person.” “The simple person,” he began, “is a person who... Let me give you an example. There is a young woman here who comes from a very rich family, but she is very, very polite. If she wants something, she asks us with great simplicity. She is so gentle that you don’t even realize she was making a complaint. But other people are very different. They think they have money, so they come up to you and, I don’t know, I can’t even describe it. The person who is not simple is arrogant.” I asked Edivaldo for an example of a resident who was not a simple person. “There is a resident here who makes a lot of demands, [...] and he does this in a very rude way.” Edivaldo lowered his voice. “This man has an apartment full of cats, but to him the doormen are nothing. He doesn’t care about people who don’t have money. Do you understand? A simple person is not like that.”

The doormen who have formed cross-class ties with residents do more than simply make distinctions like the one between “simple” and “arrogant” residents -- they adapt their behavior towards maximizing opportunities arising out of amicable relationships with residents. Eliomar consciously nurtured these cross-class ties: “When a conflict with a resident arises, I try to be as polite and accommodating as possible, and that disarms them. We can’t carry our opinions out in the open, because [the residents] are the proprietors, so it would be unwise for me to contradict them. [...] But why should I bear a grudge? No way. One day he’ll end up being my friend.” Eliomar saw the employer-worker bond as fluid, and as a result he was open to interactions of a paternalistic nature.

These contrasting attitudes reflect the impact of institutional change on role definitions and expectations. The pattern of cross-class ties found among Ipanema doormen cannot be explained through a narrow focus on individual-level characteristics or social actors' structural positions alone. The formalization implemented by the union and the management firms has decreased the opportunities available for cross-class contact and altered cultural norms about the appropriateness and desirability of such ties.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has hinged on the question of when, and how, people at the bottom of the social pyramid are able to form resource-rich ties with people at the top. The study shows that, contrary to what current thinking about social capital and structural distance would predict, cross-class ties do occur even in settings marked by enormous socioeconomic disparity. Moreover, social distance is not the sole determinant of access to social capital -- two individuals occupying the exact same niche in a system of stratification can have very different access to social capital. The factors that enable certain individuals to bridge the class divide cannot be gleaned from individual characteristics or relative structural position alone. In the case of the doormen, a culture of paternalism enhanced by informal workplace norms allowed some residents and doormen to nurture resource-rich ties. These ties entailed sustained relationships of exchange conditioned by, and interpreted in light of, significant power asymmetries between residents and doormen.

At the level of theory, these findings help complement strictly structural analyses of social capital with deeper understanding of the content of social ties, reflected not only in

the type of resources that flow across them but also in the actors' behavior and subjective interpretation of those relationships. The study also describes in concrete terms how culture and institutional context interact to shape personal networks. The transactionalist approach used to discern these causal dynamics is particularly applicable to studies linking social capital to inequality, since it is clear that "distances" between individuals cannot be gauged solely in terms of differential access to material resources and status.

Further research on cross-class ties should focus on settings where potential contact between people of different class backgrounds comes about through mechanisms other than residential employment. The doormen studied here labor in relatively isolated workplaces rather than in a single bureaucratic apparatus. Future work might focus on cases in which workers are centralized in a single institutional context, where definitions of roles and expectations can vary widely. Finally, studies of cross-class ties should explore settings where social distances are not as dramatic as those found between doormen and residents of Ipanema. Research along these lines will help complement the current focus of network and social capital scholarship with a deeper understanding of the circumstances that generate "bridging" relationships such as cross-class ties.

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