Neighborhood Institutions as Resource Brokers: Childcare Centers, Interorganizational Ties, and Resource Access among the Poor

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Current theories of how individuals in poor neighborhoods access information and resources have focused primarily on social ties, with concepts such as social isolation dominating discussion. But these theories ignore that individuals often access resources through interorganizational ties. The author suggests that an important role of neighborhood institutions such as churches and childcare centers is to serve as resource brokers*—organizations that have ties to businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies rich in resources and that provide their patrons with access to these resources. This article presents a set of propositions to understand how and why neighborhood institutions broker resources and applies these propositions to a case study of 16 childcare centers in high poverty neighborhoods in New York City. The author argues that resource brokers may be understood as interorganizationally networked, loosely coupled entities whose actors respond to pressures of multiple origins, including professional norms and state mandates. He shows that, through mechanisms that vary in their formality and staff dependence, childcare centers provide access to a remarkable array of resources from external organizations. Findings suggest that resource access among the poor should be understood as an organizationally embedded process, and that true disadvantage may result not merely from living in poor neighborhoods, but from not participating in well-connected neighborhood institutions.*

How do residents of poor neighborhoods access valuable resources, such as information about schools? Poverty scholars have demonstrated that one of the most important ways is through their social ties. However, they have largely neglected the significance of *organizational* ties—the ties of the neighborhood institutions in which the residents participate. Neighborhood institutions, such as churches, recreation centers, and childcare centers, are primarily organizations, and as such, they maintain ties to other organizations through which resources are exchanged. Some of these resources may benefit the patrons of the neighborhood institutions, making the ties useful to the poor or the socially isolated (Wilson 1987, 1996). In this respect, neighborhood institutions may perform the role of *resource brokers*, organizations possessing ties to businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies rich in resources, which then provide the neighborhood institutions' patrons with access to these resources (Chaskin et al. 2001).

Recent scholarship has noted this phenomenon, which is tied to the high, and arguably increasing, collaboration among organizations in the private and public and the for-profit and nonprofit sectors (Austin 2000; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Melvin Delgado (1997, 1998, 1999)

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showed that beauty salons and botanical shops in immigrant neighborhoods had ties to health organizations that provided the businesses' clients with health-related information, services, and free goods, such as contraceptives. Elsewhere, I have shown that ties between a local community center and a large technology business provided free, state-of-the-art computer use and internet access to residents of a Boston housing project (Small 2004). Omar McRoberts (2003) discovered some black urban churches that provided congregants with "information on jobs, medical care, educational opportunities, naturalization services," and other resources, in part through their ties to other organizations (p. 105). Based on a survey of over 500 congregations, Nancy T. Ammerman (2005) has recently documented that brokerage of resources through ties to other organizations is common among congregations.

Nevertheless, there are critical gaps in the scholarship on this important process. Little is known about what types of resources are available through broker organizations in poor neighborhoods. And few urban researchers have examined how or why neighborhood institutions serve as brokers, rendering the underlying mechanisms a conceptual black box. For example, while a beauty salon in a poor neighborhood may provide free contraceptives through its ties to a health organization, it is not clear why a beauty salon would do this, how long it is likely to do it, or whether other neighborhood institutions could be expected to do the same. Unfortunately, urban poverty scholars have neglected the relevant work of sociologists of organizations, who have produced an abundant literature on related issues in other settings (Laumann, Galaskiewicz, and Marsden 1978; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). This study taps into their work to open the black box.

Understanding resource brokering through neighborhood institutions is critical to the study of urban poverty. First, in high poverty neighborhoods, organizational ties may substitute for information and connections that residents' social ties cannot provide. William J. Wilson (1987, 1996) and others have argued that residents in high poverty neighborhoods tend to be isolated from the resource-rich middle class, and there is some evidence to support this notion (Fernandez and Harris 1992). However, if organizational networks do broker resources, then the range of alternatives for accessing resources in high poverty areas is larger than anticipated by existing social disorganization theories, and the notion of resource deprivation in poor neighborhoods should be reexamined. Importantly, the truly disadvantaged may be not merely those living in poor neighborhoods, but those *not participating in well-connected neighborhood institutions*.

Second, understanding the roles played by neighborhood institutions has become increasingly important in light of dramatic changes in policy and in the economic and political landscapes over the past decade. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) toughened eligibility rules for recipients. While it has been credited with reducing the welfare roles, a robust economy through the latter half of the 1990s kept unemployment rates low, which partly accounts for effects often attributed to the law. Today, a less robust economy, a record federal budget deficit, and an administration and congress unlikely to increase welfare benefits mean that institutions in the private sector are likely to become increasingly important to the inner city poor. This includes not just private neighborhood institutions but also publicly-funded ones that have resource-rich ties to private businesses and nonprofits. Despite the likelihood of an increase in demand for their services, the study of neighborhood institutions has shown little progress in recent years. Community building organizations (CBOs) have been the particular focus for most of the limited number of works published on neighborhood institutions (e.g., Chaskin et al. 2001).

Using a case study of one the most important neighborhood institutions, the childcare center, this study begins to systematize knowledge of resource brokers, from the ground up. Drawing on 16 centers in high poverty neighborhoods in New York City, I ask three questions: *What* resources do childcare centers broker? *How* are they brokered? And *why*? I develop a set of propositions to examine how and why neighborhood institutions broker resources. I argue that resource brokers should be understood as networked and loosely coupled

organizations that provide a space for both formal and informal social interaction among neighborhood residents. Rather than pursuing single organizational objectives, these organizations and their actors respond to multiple pressures from heterogeneous sources, such as the state, professional norms, and external agencies aiming to target the poor. Applying this perspective to childcare centers, I uncover that the centers act as brokers, offering parents a surprisingly wide variety of resources, including those provided by businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies. The findings suggest that resource access among the poor should be understood as embedded in organizations, such that resource deprivation becomes, in part, the absence of ties to networked organizations.

After a discussion of neighborhood institutions as resource brokers, I describe the data and methods used in the study. Then, I address what resources childcare centers broker, how they broker them, and why. I also consider the conditions under which these centers are likely to be effective brokers, and finally, discuss implications for the study of urban poverty.

Neighborhood Institutions as Resource Brokers

A resource may be defined as any symbolic or material good beneficial to an individual (Lin 1999, 2001). This may include economic or social capital, information, a credential, a material good, or a service, among other things (Bourdieu 1985; Coleman 1988; Portes 1998). This study is primarily concerned with access to two types of resources, information, and services that buffer individuals against the effects of poverty.

Several scholars have shown that limited access to information contributes to unemployment (Kasinitz and Rosenberg 1996; Rankin and Quane 2000; Smith 2001; Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998; Wacquant and Wilson 1989; Wilson 1987, 1996). Similarly, it appears to contribute to low participation rates among low income mothers eligible for government programs such as Medicaid, WIC, or Food Stamps (Currie 2004). Despite this, little research has addressed how the poor access information, and most studies have focused on social ties (Lin, Vaughn, and Ensel 1981; Smith 2001, 2003; Wilson 1987). Since networks among the poor have been shown to include few non-poor, their use as information sources may be limited (Fernandez and Harris 1992; Granovetter 1973; Marsden 1987; Marsden and Lin 1982; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). With regard to accessing services, most of the literature has also focused on social ties. Carol B. Stack (1974) showed that low income, black mothers use social ties for childcare services, and Margaret K. Nelson (2000) showed that ties among the poor are used in crises, for services such as fixing a broken car and even gardening. Many have shown the poor use social networks for social support services (for literature reviews, see Briggs 1998; Domínguez and Watkins 2003; House, Umberson, and Landis 1988; Small and Newman 2001). Nevertheless, the literature has not examined access to either information or services through the ties of neighborhood institutions (but see Delgado 1997, 1999 on the ties of neighborhood institutions; on service provisions and organizations more broadly, see Austin 2000; Mulroy and Shay 1997; Stone 2000).

A neighborhood institution is defined here as any organization with a physical establishment, located in a neighborhood, and having a clientele composed primarily of neighborhood residents. This includes for-profit and nonprofit, publicly and privately funded organizations, and religious and secular organizations.[1] By this definition, neighborhood institutions may be, but do not need to be, aimed at community improvement. Examples include recreation

1. To define neighborhood institutions narrowly in theory would betray the heterogeneity that occurs in practice. As Milofsky (1987) has argued in a study of neighborhood-based organizations, definition of this entity "needs to be loose rather than precise because NBOs are so often small, fluid, and loosely structured. The structural variety among NBOs makes it hard to say exactly which attributes are necessary to include an entity in that category" (p. 279). In this study, what is critical is the condition of brokerage, not the essence of a neighborhood institution.

centers, barbershops, childcare centers, places of worship, gyms, and credit unions (see Gamm 1999; May 2001; McRoberts 2003; Pattillo-McCoy 1999; Small 2004; Wacquant 2004). A resource broker is a neighborhood institution through whose interorganizational connections its clients or patrons have access to resources of interest to them.

The term "brokers" has been employed in the study of networks. Ronald Burt (1992, 2001) defines brokers as individuals who make possible a bridge between two discrete networks. Robert Chaskin and associates (2001) define "organizational brokers" as community-building organizations that tie separate organizations to one another to accomplish local neighborhood tasks and build community capacity. While Burt's brokers tie individuals to other individuals, and Chaskin and colleagues' brokers tie organizations to other organizations, resource brokers, in the current study, tie individuals to organizations, and, importantly, transfer resources to the individual.

Theoretical Model

My understanding of resource brokers is based on four assumptions. First, *resource brokers are interorganizationally networked neighborhood institutions.* Organizational theorists have consistently recognized that organizations respond to and interact with other organizations, rather than operating in isolation from them (Aldrich 1976; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). In an early theory, Roland L. Warren (1978) distinguished between neighborhood organizations' horizontal ties (to other neighborhood organizations) and vertical ties (to nonlocal organizations, such as the state), within a theory of embedded social systems. Since then, scholars have argued that collaboration across the government, for-profit, and private nonprofit sectors has increased and taken complex forms (Austin 2000; Salamon 1995; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Governments employ nonprofits and businesses to fulfill their needs, whether through funding (in which case the government retains some authority) or through collaborative relationships (in which case the entities operate as partners). Businesses aiming to target a population or to improve or maintain positive public relations collaborate with nonprofits to meet their respective goals. For example, the City Year youth organization and the Timberland shoe company have maintained a longstanding partnership (Austin 2000). Collaborations may range from stable, permanent partnerships to temporary, ad hoc arrangements established to attain a common goal. Therefore, the assumption that resource brokers are interorganizationally networked does not presuppose either the type or the permanence of the relation. Resource brokers may be tied to organizations of any type, whether local or external, in the same or a different sector, including organizations that may exercise some authority over their functioning (see Chaskin et al. 2001).

Second, *resource brokers are decoupled or loosely coupled neighborhood institutions.* Organization scholars employ the term "decoupling" to indicate that a single organization may contain multiple and uncoordinated interests within it (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Importantly, the formal interests of an organization may differ from the interests of its staff members. In contrast to the expectation that all the actors in a neighborhood institution (e.g., a barbershop) are singlemindedly concerned with the same end (e.g., haircutting or increasing market share), resource brokers are presumed to be composed of *multiple* members pursuing both collective and *heterogeneous* interests. Consequently, staff members of a neighborhood institution may pursue actions that transfer another organization's resources to their own patrons, even if it is neither formally required of them nor part of organizational priorities.

Third, *resource brokers are subject to institutional pressures* (DiMaggio and Powell 1977). Factors that are institutional in nature, such as norms of behavior, socialization, external authority, and the need for legitimacy, influence the actions of actors in these neighborhood institutions. Thus, brokers are not expected to act in light of a single factor, such as economic interest.

Two important institutional influences have been termed "normative" and "coercive" pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1977). "Normative pressures" refers to the norms about organizational functioning or service provision that may encourage neighborhood institutions or their staff members to establish ties to other organizations. These norms are often developed through professional training. For example, church pastors may subscribe to a belief in "worldly" participation that encourages them to develop ties to organizations providing medical care or educational opportunities, if these appear to be among congregants' needs (Ammerman 2005; McRoberts 2003:Chapter 6). In response to normative factors, they may even undertake tasks that do not obviously fall within their ministerial purview. McRoberts reports that pastors at the Maison d'Esprit congregation in Boston "used their positions to find jobs for church members" in local hospitals on "numerous occasions" (2003:105).

"Coercive pressures," on the other hand, stem from larger authorities that mandate or establish regulations resulting in interorganizational ties or the exchange of resources across organizations. The state may be an especially important entity because it may directly or indirectly affect the creation of these ties. Particularly within cities, multiple layers of government may exploit regulatory rights in ways that influence the actions of organizations (Logan and Molotch 1987). City governments may mandate interorganizational collaboration as a condition for funding. A government entity may also have mandates, unrelated to organizational collaboration, that indirectly result in the creation of such ties. The federal Head Start program, for example, requires its centers to involve parents and provide certain services, which may encourage interorganizational collaboration (Zigler and Muenchow 1992).

Powerful nongovernmental entities, such as large nonprofits, exert coercive pressures as well. Many large nonprofit donors may directly and indirectly contribute to interorganizational tie building through requirements they impose on grant recipients. For example, United Way, one major funder, "work[s] with schools, government agencies, businesses, organized labor, financial institutions, community development corporations, voluntary and neighborhood associations, the faith community, and others" (United Way of America 2005), and exerts influence through its funding capacity (see Stone, Hager, and Griffin 2001). These expectations are likely to shape the agendas of future grant seekers.

Fourth, *resource brokers are sites for social interaction.* Neighborhood institutions are establishments with a physical location, and thus, a space for social interaction and social networking. Consequently, not all of the circumstances unfolding in broker institutions will stem from the formal or deliberate actions of the organization. Informal interactions between patrons and staff members, and among patrons themselves, are central to participation in a neighborhood institution. For example, McRoberts (2003) found that, in the community room of a neighborhood church, "church members socialized informally and in the process shared a great deal of information" on issues such as "immigration and legalization services" and "help with children experiencing adjustment problems in school" (p. 106). Thus, neighborhood institutions may be passive brokers, by providing a space for the exchange of resources among individuals.

In sum, I conceive of the resource broker as a loosely coupled entity where actors, responding to multiple interests and pressures, both formally and informally mobilize interorganizational ties to broker resources attached to those ties.

Childcare Centers in New York City

For this study, I examine 16 childcare centers that serve low income children in New York City. Childcare centers are ideal study sites for several reasons. First, by my definition, they are neighborhood institutions. They typically serve residents within the neighborhood, given parental preferences for center location. For example, a survey of Maryland parents reported that 80.4 percent preferred a childcare center near their homes, with proximity

being the most important factor associated with formal childcare use (Maryland Committee for Children 2003). Second, the childcare center has become an increasingly important institution as births to unmarried mothers, which peaked in the 1990s, have remained consistently high (National Center for Health Statistics 2004:51). It has become especially important to low income mothers, as the PRWORA instituted a work requirement, forcing mothers to find childcare arrangements. Third, unlike other neighborhood institutions, childcare centers span the full range of sectors: They may be for-profit or nonprofit, publicly or privately funded, and religious or secular, yielding a rich variety of forms and interests. Few neighborhood institutions afford this analytical leverage. Churches, for example, are always nonprofits.

Childcare centers are also resource brokers in ways rarely acknowledged in the literature. A case in point is the Felicidad Daycare, a private nonprofit center in a poor New York City neighborhood.[2] The center serves over one hundred children of low income parents, who pay according to their income. A large, sprawling center in the basement of a corner building, it contrasts the gritty, sooty, graffiti-laced landscape of its block with a clean and modern interior. Here, parents regularly and formally obtain resources of high value: government agencies offer information, such as how to treat asthma; a health organization provides basic services, such as immunizations; and parents are formally referred as needed to other service providers, including a drug rehabilitation center, a mental health clinic, an adult literacy center, a domestic abuse expert, an HIV/AIDS clinic, and a counseling center. All of these organizations offer free or low cost services to center parents.

There are over 1,200 licensed childcare centers in New York City. These include for- and nonprofit centers, Head Start centers, half-day, and full-day centers, among other categories. Within the city, childcare is regulated by the Administration for Children's Services (ACS), a major agency in charge of administering Head Start and city-funded childcare centers (NYCACS 2005). New York is an ideal location for the study because it has a large nonprofit and service sector, a diverse poor population, and large concentrations of poor neighborhoods.

All cases were chosen from a canvass of centers in three high poverty neighborhoods of varying racial compositions (predominantly black, white, or Latino). The neighborhoods encompassed between three and five census tracts, and tracts were selected to accord with geographic and social boundaries and to match income and race criteria. Three researchers canvassed all childcare centers listed in the telephone directory, in official records, in easily accessible websites, or visible from the street.[3] In order to focus on centers serving low income parents, the study is further limited to those centers in which at least half of the children are on publicly funded vouchers, receive the service for free, or pay on a sliding scale based on income. Two of the centers have a standard tuition, but it is well below New York City market rates, such that it still serves primarily low income families. Table 1 lists center characteristics. The centers vary evenly in racial composition.[4] Only two are for-profit and, of the remaining fourteen, seven centers are either Head Start or ACS centers, which are sponsored by nonprofit organizations and funded by ACS (from city funds). Thirteen offer their services for free or on a sliding scale.

Researchers interviewed center directors or assistant directors and observed the centers between one and seven times. In each, we collected notes by hand and (sometimes) tape recorded

2. All names and some identifying details have been changed to ensure anonymity. There are well over a thousand licensed childcare centers in New York City. Every attempt has been made to create a pseudonym not matching an existing name.

3. The study was limited to licensed centers with physical locations where providers cared for children ages 5 and under. This excluded licensed family childcare homes (where up to five children are cared for by a provider in her own home); licensed "centers" with no facilities for care, where parents are channeled to family childcare homes; and unlicensed care households.

4. While racial differences among centers are important (and explored in the larger study), differences in brokerage were less tied to race than to organizational factors. To conserve space and maintain focus, these differences are addressed only where relevant to the issues at hand.

Table 1 • *Childcare Center Characteristics, N = 16*

	Mean	*n*
Number of slots	95	
Centers in which plurality of children are		
White		6
Black		5
Latino		5
Nonprofit (private or public)		14
Publicly funded (ACS or Head Start)		7
Free service or sliding scale pay		13

Note: Centers located in three neighborhoods in which the percent of persons poor is between 34% and 46%.

interviews, obtaining data on physical conditions of the center, social interactions, and available resources. From the interviews, we obtained data on the motivations for establishing interorganizational ties, the nature of those ties, and the resources available to parents. All interviews and observations were recorded into detailed fieldnotes, which were converted to Atlas.ti primary documents and coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti. To ensure high and consistent data quality, I read each of the observers' fieldnotes, as they were produced, and commented on quality, comparability across observers, and issues for further exploration.

I coded the field notes for any discussion of interorganizational ties and extracted these quotations, sorting them multiple ways (by type of organization, by funding source, etc.) and carefully analyzing their content. At this point, I re-examined the literature, which sharpened the theories and prompted reanalysis and recoding of the data. Occasionally, we made follow-up telephone calls to centers to clarify or expand on issues that emerged during the analysis. Documentary data complemented the case studies and included federal and city documents on paper and online. Rather than aiming to present a representative account of childcare characteristics for the city of New York, this study describes the range of resources brokered and the mechanisms through which brokering took place.

What Resources Are Brokered

Childcare centers brokered resources from several types of organizations: government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and businesses. Table 2 presents the organizations, by category; Table 3 presents the resources brokered. They show remarkable range in both the types of resources and the types of organizations. Table 2 indicates that the government agencies included small organizations such as fire houses (which instructed children on fire safety) and large ones, such as federal childcare agencies and the city's Human Resources Administration, a large, highly networked agency that provides a host of services, such as work training, essential services for individuals with AIDS, adult protective services to the mentally disabled, and public health insurance (NYCHRA 2005). Nonprofit organizations constituted, by far, the largest source of resources. These organizations often used the childcare centers in poor neighborhoods as a way to target low income parents. Hospitals, churches, community or ethnic organizations, child well-being agencies, drug abuse centers, mental and physical health clinics, museums, soup kitchens, and youth groups were among those represented. Often, the childcare centers were a subunit of a much larger nonprofit organization located elsewhere, so that the nonprofit's networks became part of the center's, or the larger nonprofit's other subunits sometimes became sister organizations, providing different services to

Table 2 • *Organizations Providing Resources through Childcare Centers*

Government agencies
Federal and city childcare agencies
City social service agency (NYC Human Resources Administration)
City education agency (Department of Education)
Fire departments
Public schools
Nonprofit organizations
Hospitals
Churches
Museums, zoos, and other cultural institutions
Child well-being organizations
Youth organizations
HIV/AIDS clinics
Drug abuse centers
Domestic violence centers/hotlines
Mental health centers
Soup kitchens/food pantries
Community organizations
Ethnic organizations
Other childcare centers
Businesses
Circuses
Movie theaters
Department stores

which center parents were referred. A few businesses, such as circuses and local movie theaters, provided resources as well, often in the form of reduced admissions or discounts. The range of organizations was large. Some centers brokered a lot fewer resources than others, but the most heavily networked centers in the study transferred resources from at least three fourths of the types of organizations listed in Table 2.

Table 3 lists the resources brokered. (This list excludes resources offered by the center itself; in other words, the center must be the broker, not the provider. This issue is complicated by centers that are part of larger nonprofits. For current purposes, in those cases I consider the center a broker of resources contained in the larger agency.) The resources range from information through direct services at no cost or low cost. Much of the brokered information regarded health or parenting, such as how to treat a child with asthma, or how to examine for lumps in the breast; safety education, such as how to prevent lead poisoning; domestic abuse education, such as the legal and nonprofit resources available to victims of abuse; general health information, such as managing work and parenting stress; and school system information, such negotiating enrollment.

Direct services characterized the widest range of resources brokered, and included those performed by other organizations on the center premises or at offsite locations. Some of the services were free or low cost children's services, for which parents would normally have had to pay. These included health-related items, such as free healthcare, speech therapy, disability screening, or dental services for children. Other services were specifically targeted at parents, such as free or subsidized healthcare, domestic abuse counseling, housing support (such as assistance in dealing with landlords or a safe house for women leaving abusive situations), substance abuse treatment and counseling, HIV/AIDS testing and treatment, adult literacy

Table 3 • ***Resources Transferred through Childcare Centers***[a]

Information
Nutritional information (free)
Safety education (free)
Domestic abuse education (free)
Child health information (free)
Housing needs information (free)
School system information/education (free)
Direct services
Health care for child (free)
Dental care for child (free)
Speech therapy for child (free)
Domestic violence counseling (free)
Developmental services (low cost)
Health care for adults (free/low cost)
Substance abuse counseling (low cost/free)
Eye care (free/low cost)
HIV/AIDS testing and treatment (free/low cost)
Legal aid (low cost/free)
Adult literacy training (free)
Adult English language study (free)
Work training (free)
Housing support (low cost/free)
Assistance in dealing with government bureaucracy (free)
Other resources or goods
Meals (free)
Tickets to cultural events/circus (free/low cost)
Free admission year-round to cultural institutions
Employment
Toys (free)
Scholarships (free)

[a] Refers to resources that were transferred on an ongoing basis or at least once a year; excludes services provided independently by the centers.

training, adult language study, and work training. One organization maintained a comprehensive database of center parents' information, such that, if they were eligible for government programs such as Medicaid, the parent was informed of the program and shown how to apply.

The table shows one additional category of resources found in a small number of centers. One center was tied to a soup kitchen that regularly served parents in need. Another offered access cards for parents to attend museums and events throughout the city at no cost. Another center teamed with a department store to offer toys during Christmas. In short, as the table makes clear, the resources accessed through the centers are potentially very valuable to low income parents.

How Resources Are Brokered

The questions of how and why centers broker resources are inextricably linked. It is important to note that the resources were brokered through a number of mechanisms as varied as the resources themselves, rather than by a single means. For example, one center organized a

workshop in which a government agency worker instructed parents on child discipline and abuse. In this case, the mechanism for the transfer of information was the workshop. At another, an optometry school gave parents from the center low-cost vision screenings, through an optometrist's site visit. Another center posted a bulletin board with information on a person's legal rights if faced with eviction, along with a telephone number for legal assistance. This time, the board was the medium of transfer. The mechanisms involved an evident variety of processes and arrangements: in-center workshops for parents, bulletin boards, newsletters, mailing lists, site visits from staff of the sending organizations, active management by center staff, direct referrals to the organizations, field trips to the organizations, and even informal networks.

One way to categorize these mechanisms is according to the degree to which staff members must exercise agency in brokering the resource and the degree to which brokerage is a formal element of the operation of the center. Brokering a resource may require active staff participation, or it may not, such as when a center's members automatically receive discounts at a given venue. Brokering may be formalized into center operations, through practices written into job descriptions or entered into budgets, or it may take place informally, whether through the acts of staff or through social interaction among patrons. Thus, I divide the mechanisms along two axes: formality and staff dependence (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Stinchcombe 2001).

Table 4 identifies the types of mechanisms and lists examples of each. I emphasize that the four cells refer to ends in two continua, not categorical distinctions. Staff-dependent, formal mechanisms were common, and the easiest to identify; however, the presence of mechanisms in the other three quadrants accounts for why low-budget centers may still be effective brokers.

When resources were transferred through staff dependent, formal mechanisms, as shown in the top left of Table 4, teachers and other staff members acted according to their job requirements. One of the most common was the parent workshop. Another was disability screening; for example, at Just Like Home, a for-profit center in the white neighborhood, a Department of Education specialist made site visits once a month, visits coordinated with teachers and staff from the center. Other resources transferred formally, and through the deliberate actions of staff, were unrelated to health or education. At the nonprofit Toy Truck center, every year the director wrote to nonprofit organizations and to department stores to request Christmas gifts for the center's children.

Perhaps the most common mechanism at this end of the continuum was the active referral. This involved either sending the parent to an outside organization or bringing the organizational representative to the center. Home Away from Home, a publicly funded, nonprofit center on the ground floor of a brick building, is a mostly Latino and black center, where Spanish floated through its colorful hallways as frequently as any other language. This center operated an extensive referral service. When a child was suspected of having a learning disability, the center brought in a language specialist, who tested the child and established a corrective plan. Many of the center's referrals regarded domestic abuse issues, involving both

Table 4 • ***Mechanisms through which Resources Are Brokered, by Type***

	High Staff Dependence	*Low Staff Dependence*
Formal	Institutionalized, and center staff exercise agency (e.g., instructional workshop)	Institutionalized, but center staff do little or nothing (e.g., membership benefits)
Informal	Not institutionalized, but center staff do so regardless (e.g., recommendation by teacher during a field trip)	Not institutionalized, and center staff do little or nothing (e.g., recommendation by other parents met during field trip)

social service agencies and independent women's organizations. The center had longstanding ties to health organizations. Interns and nurses from a local hospital gave free, annual check-ups to children whose parents signed a consent form. In addition, parents with special needs were frequently referred to health clinics themselves. All of these mechanisms were formal elements of center operations and required a measure of staff participation.

Staff dependency does not necessarily imply staff initiative, however. For example, at the Roller Coaster Head Start center in the Latino neighborhood, as the director explained, parents are often the main agents (hand recorded): "There are . . . classroom meetings once per month and an overall meeting once per [year]. That is run by the parent body for all of the parents. What they do depends year by year. They make recommendations for workshops they want," and the director follows the parents' lead.

Some resources were brokered formally, but through mechanisms that did not require staff participation (Table 4, top right). As public spaces with halls, bulletin boards, and meeting rooms, centers made possible the passive brokering of resources. The most common of these mechanisms was the use of bulletin boards as repositories of information about external organizations. Corona Childcare was a small, cramped space in the basement of a church. The narrow hall leading to the main office, where parents registered their children and spoke to the director, served as a waiting area. On one of the hall's walls hung a bulletin board containing various fliers from external organizations, which parents could read while they waited. One flier was for a household-oriented human service agency. It listed a telephone number to call for help dealing with landlords, unfair rent adjustments, or information on a rent reduction for the elderly. Another flier contained information on how to obtain health insurance. A third provided information on obtaining help from WIC, the federal program whose mission is "to safeguard the health of low income women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are at nutritional risk by providing nutritious foods to supplement diets, information on healthy eating, and referrals to health care" (USDAFNS 2005). Information-filled bulletin boards were ubiquitous throughout our centers.

Another, perhaps more important, formal, non-staff dependent mechanism may be thought of as a "membership benefit." A few of the centers were part of the Cool Culture program. Any publicly funded center in the city may enroll in the program, funded by nonprofit foundations (Cool Culture 2005). Once the center is enrolled, parents receive an access card that provides admission, without charge or contribution, to over 30 museums, botanical gardens, and zoos in New York City, including the Children's Museum, the Museo del Barrio, the Whitney, and the Guggenheim.

Centers also brokered resources through informal mechanisms. Many resources were brokered through the participation of high-agency staff acting outside of their formal requirements (Table 4, bottom left). The Standing in Faith religious private center in the predominantly black neighborhood serves children through kindergarten. The director commented on the acts of teachers to broker information on local schools: "Our kindergarten teachers, they're a great bunch; they compiled a list of private schools, parochial schools, and the better public schools. And they give [parents] that list the first . . . month of school so that they can get started checking other schools." This initiative had never been required of the teachers. Similarly, staff reported an ethic of alertness to potential problems, a readiness to act informally. One mother at Felicidad described an especially stressful time of her life, when she experienced depression: "A lot of the teachers know my situation, what I went through, the depression, and a lot of them were there for me. . . . There were times I would drop [the children] off here and the principal would tell me something because I would come late. If she would just tell me like, 'Why are you late today again?' I would just be hysterical crying and I didn't know why. And then they would pull me to the side and say, 'Is everything okay? Is your husband—?' I [would say], 'No, I'm okay.'"

Sometimes the staff or directors developed informal relations with other organizations, from which the center received resources, although these relations had not yet become (and

might never become) formal exchange relations. The Standing in Faith director explained how such a relationship developed with a major New York department store: "[One of the company executives] would see our sign [as] he rode past here on the bus. And so he followed up on it and got his company to start helping us with our wish list. . . . Things that we would like to have." The interviewer asked about what resources they had received: "crayons and pencils, rugs for the rooms, valences . . . for the windows. Scholarships!" The department store had donated $9,000 from the proceeds of a sample sale. Finally, she explained, "they gave us computers, too, for some of the classes." This relationship, however, had not been formalized between the center and the department store.

Finally, the bottom, right quadrant of Table 4 indicates some resources that were transferred through mechanisms that were neither formal elements of center operations nor products of staff involvement. Here, the neighborhood institution qualifies as a broker, less because of its actions, than because of actions it makes possible. The centers facilitated the development of social ties among parents through events, rules, and practices that were part of their operations and as spaces for social interaction. Several centers sponsored trips to zoos and parks every year. At A Place Upstairs, the largest of these was a trip to Sesame Place in Pennsylvania, where parents brought other family members and friends. These trips doubled as occasions for informal referrals and the transmission of information, as parents learned about child-rearing strategies and services from other organizations.

Several of the centers had parent association meetings during which parents networked heavily with other parents. As an ACS center, Felicidad Daycare was required to establish a parents' association elected by parents. The director noted that the election process had mobilized parents when they realized the association was necessary for the continued funding of their subsidized childcare center. Usually, two parents ran for each of the first three offices and one for the last, and parents, in fact, campaigned for the positions. "Some go overboard," as the director half-jokingly explained, making videos of themselves describing what they would do as president. During the election period, the center, allowed a video cassette recorder to play the videos continuously in the center's small but well-lit lobby. Other parents distributed fliers. The election process, in short, encouraged parents to network, which allowed the exchange of information from or about other organizations and about experiences with services provided through the center. These mechanisms are interesting because parents who have successfully accessed an external organization's resources become trustworthy sources of information on sensitive issues, such as domestic abuse and depression, for other skeptical or anxious parents.

Why Resources Are Brokered

The heterogeneity of mechanisms underlying resource brokering should make clear that there is no single reason a center brokers resources, just as no single actor fully controls the process. Centers brokered resources for at least the following reasons: policy mandates, mandates from a funder or larger organization, the initiative of a sending organization, convenience, staff or directors' belief that it was the "right thing to do," the belief that it helped provide childcare more effectively, and a request from parents or clients. The high level of decoupling in center operations and a center's ability to serve as a site for social interaction allowed for multiple actors to influence the brokerage process—specifically, the state, the sending organization, the center director, the teacher, and the parent.

Importantly, institutional pressures play a role, and it is crucial to address in greater depth how these pressures help to account for why centers broker resources. Two sets of factors are especially important in the context of childcare centers: *coercive* and *normative* pressures. *Mimetic* pressures, though less prevalent, also make clear the diversity of potential institutional influences.

Coercive pressures are those under which a more powerful authority mandates or encourages the childcare center to broker resources from other organizations. A principal authority is the state. Some staff interventions are required by the state in any organization in which children are involved. For example, as the director of Learning Letters, a private center in the black neighborhood, explained, "We had a couple where the parent was stressed and hit the kid out of anger. We had to contact children's services. We are obligated to do so." However, not all mandates revolved around child protection. ACS centers were required to disseminate health information. Also, Head Start's concept of "maximum feasible participation of . . . poor" parents implies involving parents in some decision-making roles, providing parenting skills, and generally increasing parents' self-efficacy (Zigler and Muenchow 1992; see also Pizzo and Tufankjian 2004; USDHHS 2005). In Head Start centers, these mandates often translated into collaborations with other organizations to provide services.

Large entities other than the state also held sway over childcare centers. The large, multiservice, nonprofit organization that ran the Roller Coaster center had lawyers on staff providing legal services. An ethnographer reported: "I asked [the director] if parents have access to these lawyers, and he said enthusiastically, 'Yeah! Pro bono! We've resolved a few landlord-tenant disputes.'" The larger nonprofit sees the childcare center as one leg of its comprehensive service provision endeavor, and it negotiates the transfer of resources from one leg to another. Within this context, it is important to note that the term "coercive" does not imply that staff would otherwise be reluctant to broker resources. As the director of Roller Coaster explained, "I've been involved in three legal cases this year. Two were landlord-tenant disputes and one was about paying a bill for a health related matter . . . Housing is always a big issue . . . Our main object is to create stability [for families] over long periods of time. That is our main purpose." The term "coercive" implies, instead, that the ultimate authority pushing for the transfer of this particular resource lies in a more powerful entity.

Normative factors also affect the actions of staff members, both teachers and directors. Many directors expressed a holistic philosophy toward childcare, in which they provide a service to not only children but also parents and the community. After visiting A Place Upstairs, I wrote in fieldnotes, "[the director] said, 'We're community-based; we're community-minded.' She explained that [her] daycare was more of 'a family place,' and as she said this, she brought her arms to her chest as if she were carrying an infant. [She then explained that] day care is 'more loving, close-knitted, family oriented' than school. She seemed to believe that this was a way to help parents make the transition into the public school system." During professional development, practitioners develop a set of beliefs about the way adequate service should be provided. While political forces may encourage centers to focus their, often limited, resources on providing childcare, education, and nothing else, professional development, coupled with experience in poor neighborhoods, may suggest that this is implausible, impractical, or unethical. The effects of professional and academic training may be represented in the belief, for example, that teachers should be vigilant if parents seem unusually stressed, or that childcare begins with the parent, rather than the child.

Some researchers have noted that professional service providers may see themselves as specialists providing only the service for which they have been trained (Bromer and Henly 2004). Yet when confronted with clients facing difficult circumstances, this appeared to translate less into detachment than into seeking specialists in other organizations to address concerns for which they are not trained. A staff member at the Sandwich center, a private center in the white neighborhood, explained, regarding domestic violence: "For that type of thing we refer out. Those are too involved to us." A professional ethic combined with experience in the field may make it appear obvious to childcare center staff that their duties must involve being alert to these issues. One ethnographer reported the following about a conversation with a center director: "[According to the director,] the center also refers [parents] for domestic violence issues. They work with 'Victim's Services,' which has a domestic violence program. I asked why the center does this. [The director] made a face that told me he thought it

was an obvious question. 'Because there's domestic violence,' he said." Consistent with these comments, the professional literature on service provision suggests practitioners increasingly believe in interorganizational collaboration, with different specialists providing different services (Austin 2000; Delgado 1999).

Mimesis (DiMaggio and Powell 1977) also produces institutional pressure. Whether through the pressure of competition or the need to "keep up," directors may broker resources in response to actions they have witnessed elsewhere. The director of Tweed, a private, religious center in the black neighborhood, explained why she arranged for the Board of Education to send a nurse routinely to the center to perform physical exams: "I used to be the director of the YMCA, and these are things that came throughout my office then so, why not come to the office here? Also, [at] the other schools I worked at up at Westchester County, these were also services that were provided in the Westchester County area. And they're free, so, why should that not be provided here in the [poor black neighborhood]?"

Brokering Resources Effectively

The wide range of resources brokered in centers should make clear that this neighborhood institution is fulfilling much more than the roles otherwise expected of it. The significance of this process, however, depends in part on the effectiveness with which centers or other neighborhood institutions broker resources. Given that a center may broker some resources effectively and not others, it is important to examine the mechanisms that make successful brokering possible. I explore hypotheses based on the framework developed in this study.

The effectiveness of brokering depends on several factors. Three of these are especially important in the context of urban poverty: *stability* over time, *resilience* to political or economic shifts, and *capacity* to broker resources related to sensitive issues.

If a resource is brokered stably, it is transferred consistently over time. I hypothesize that the formalization of the mechanism into center operations should be a strong predictor of stability. Formal mechanisms are institutionalized in various forms: they are included in the yearly budgets, they are components of staff job descriptions, they are part of the contract between the parent and the center (e.g., required attendance at orientation sessions), they are physically embedded in the structure of the center (e.g., bulletin boards or workshop rooms with adult-sized chairs), and they are contracted with external organizations in reciprocal relations. These factors should make brokering more stable than would otherwise be the case.

A different type of effectiveness is resilience. I hypothesize that under conditions of limited or reduced funding for such activities or in political climates hostile to the brokering of resources, the ability of staff to operate independently of formal requirements will be associated with highly resilient brokering (assuming strong normative pressures for staff to do so). For example, while Head Start has been under persistent pressure to de-emphasize community programs in favor of cognitive development and testing (Zigler and Muenchow 1992), this may not affect all types of brokerage in Head Start centers, given sufficient decoupling between organizational mandates and the orientations of staff. Teachers and directors may and do exercise initiative for a variety of reasons.

The importance of decoupling and independent staff action is heightened by the fact that, like most parents who participated in center activities, almost all the teachers were women, and many were mothers themselves. In addition, because of the very low wages paid to childcare workers in public and private centers in New York City, many of the teachers were working-poor or near-poor mothers, just as their clients were. At Felicidad Daycare, some staff members were former clients of the center. Gender and demographic similarities between client and provider are likely to play a crucial role, for they facilitate trust between teachers and parents. Indeed, researchers have found that women-staffed, community-based

organizations are more likely than others to adopt programs relevant to women (Clarke 2000; Gittell, Ortega-Bustamante, and Steffy 2000).

A final type of effectiveness is the ability to broker resources on difficult issues. Both the low take-up rates of some programs and the low use of services, relative to demand, for such programs as domestic abuse counseling, are probably associated with the sensitivity of these issues. While formal mechanisms may be associated with stability over time, I hypothesize that informal ones are likely to be more effective in brokering these sensitive resources. Effective brokering of them also relies on capable social networks. Researchers have discussed the significance of trust for the ability to access resources through social networks (Coleman 1988). Centers that provide opportunities (through fieldtrips, cookouts, etc.) for the development of informal relations among staff and parents should be successful at developing high levels of parental trust. As a parent at Tweed explained, "There is a lot of closeness at Tweed. That's why I like the school so much. It's such a nurturing environment. . . . I really love it. I love the way they care." For her, the social ties developed in the center substituted for the support unavailable through her own personal ties. After being asked whether she found the "school community to be supportive," she replied "Yeah. I didn't need it with my first child. My mother was still alive then and I had some extended family in the area, so they provided support. But now that my mother is gone and my niece has moved away, I'm dependent on the school more for support." These circumstances are likely to allow for the brokerage of resources on sensitive issues—such as the location of an anonymous HIV testing clinic—that formal channels are unlikely to transfer as effectively. The effectiveness of informal mechanisms merit special attention in light of the difficulty that nonprofit and government agencies concerned with HIV/AIDS treatment, depression, domestic abuse, breast cancer, and other problems have in reaching low income and immigrant populations.

Both gender and ethnic factors play a role in the effectiveness of informality. In the centers, friendships often developed between parents and teachers, such that, client–staff tensions of the type occurring in welfare offices (Watkins 2003) were rare. Whereas Celeste Watkins (2003) has reported that welfare office workers often saw clients through moral lenses that reinforced a status hierarchy, we observed compatibility more often than this type of tension. The availability of settings for informal interactions among teachers and parents probably contributed to this process. Researchers have also shown that immigrants' distrust of native formal organizations makes the service-delivery process difficult, as immigrants either limit their participation in, or sidestep, the formal service sector altogether (Mahler 1995). This informality is certainly affected by ethnic and cultural similarity. Centers where the staff were Latino immigrants manifested more casual relationships with Latino parents (e.g., with parents and teachers sharing a meal outside the center) than other centers serving Latino immigrants. This is likely to have increased the ability of staff to broker sensitive resources. There is evidence consistent with this pattern in the literature on neighborhood institutions in immigrant enclaves. Melvin Delgado (1997) argues that "nontraditional settings," such as beauty parlors, botanical shops, and small businesses owned by immigrants provide effective sites for access to the resources of other organizations precisely because of the informal ties and trust between clients and staff (Delgado 1997; Delgado and Santiago 1998).

Conclusion

This study has shown that the resource broker is an important supplier of resources for the poor. The literature's neglect of resource brokerage has resulted in a skewed understanding of resource access, neighborhood institutions, and poor areas. Informed by concepts such as social isolation, past research has focused mainly on social ties, ignoring organizational ones. This study demonstrates that resource access is an *organizationally embedded process*, which leads to three larger contributions:

First, the study documents that resource access among residents of poor neighborhoods is formally affected by organizations in society at large (Chaskin et al. 2001; Marwell 2004; Warren 1978). In a society in which resources are channeled through organizational bureaucracies, and in which businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies increasingly appear to collaborate to cut costs, increase market size, improve service delivery, or fulfill mandates, neighborhood institutions in poor areas serve as critical bridges, allowing the organizations access to populations that are otherwise often difficult to reach. Organizations in all sectors have interests in reaching markets or clients in poor areas. The current administration's use of faith-based neighborhood organizations to target the poor, and the Timberland shoe company's donations of boots, jackets, and funds to the City Year youth leadership programs are but two instances of this multifaceted process. Studies of urban poverty that continue to ignore the complex collaborations among large and small organizations across sectors miss a critical component of contemporary urban life.

Second, findings suggest the complex ways in which formal organizations may serve a *substitution* function among the poor, findings that should inform the research on social support. For the socially isolated, neighborhood institutions may provide the only access point to resources (such as health information) that other populations obtain through social ties. Some recent researchers have suggested that neighborhood institutions perform this role (Domínguez and Watkins 2003). They have, however, ignored that even resource-poor neighborhood institutions may provide indirect access through their organizational ties. In fact, for some institutions, this is a significant function. This study makes clear that a serious analysis of these substitution dynamics should involve interorganizational processes.

Third, it suggests that the absence of resource brokers in neighborhoods may be more important to well-being than the concentration of poverty alone. This point should inform the literature on the "neighborhood effects" hypothesis, which states that neighborhood poverty—separate from individual poverty—independently affects life chances and well-being (Wilson 1987). Recent tests of this hypothesis (Goering and Feins 2003) have found only modest support for it. This may be partly due to differences among poor neighborhoods in the connectedness of their neighborhood institutions. For example, the negative effect of neighborhood poverty on child nutrition should be smaller among neighborhoods with resource brokers that provide access to nutrition information and health care. Thus, the relationship between neighborhood poverty and well-being may be *mediated* by neighborhood institutions and their connections, an issue neglected in much of the neighborhood effects literature (Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002).

This study has relied on the case of childcare centers. Certainly, much work on other institutions remains to be done to determine which neighborhood institutions are likely to operate as brokers. When compared to other neighborhood institutions, nonprofits and social service organizations should be stronger brokers, since they are more susceptible to government influence, their staff members are more likely to maintain service norms, and they are more dependent on grants, often from large nonprofits. Nevertheless, as the cases of beauty salons, botanical shops (Delgado 1997, 1998, 1999), community centers (Small 2004), and churches (McRoberts 2003) show, the capacity to broker resources is by no means limited to these types of organizations.[5] If, as others have suggested, organizational collaboration within and across sectors continues, then the brokering of resources should involve increasingly diverse neighborhood institutions.

5. In fact, while most centers in this study were nonprofit, there is evidence that for-profit centers, such as Just Like Home, cited above, are effective resource brokers as well. The larger project, of which this study is part, includes a random-sample survey of nearly 300 centers in New York. Preliminary findings show that, while nonprofit centers had more ties, for-profit centers were not far behind. The average private nonprofit had 1.47 formal referral ties, while the average for-profit had 0.75.

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