

Specifying the Bridges and the Cargo: Social Capital, Faith-Based Programs and the Poor

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Abstract: This paper seeks to specify what social ties are being created by secular and faith-based poverty-to-work programs and what is being transmitted by these social ties. Two different forms of “bridges” are observed: professional service ties and congregational networks. Cargo transmitted by these bridges includes employment information, material goods and services, human and cultural capital, social support and status. Note is made of the crucial “bridge-building” people who connect the clients of these programs with service providers and potential employers. Faith-based programs tend to use the congregational network bridges and may include the additional cargo of religious capital.

Researching Social Capital in Poverty-to-Work Programs

The writings of Robert Putnam have increased awareness of the importance of “social capital” for the welfare of communities and their members (1995; 2000). Yet Skocpol (1996), Greeley (1997a; 1997b), Portes (1998), DeFilippis (2001), and others critique his work, arguing that Putnam’s analysis of social capital is vague and circular and that he neglects the key insights of the coiners of the term, including the importance of power in relationships (Bourdieu 1986), and the relationship of social capital to economic capital (Coleman 1988). Despite these comments, these critics still argue that social ties are important in helping the poor, as confirmed by ethnographic poverty studies (MacLeod 1987; Newman 1999; Stack 1974) and other studies on poverty and social capital (Saegert, Thompson, and Warren 2001). Faith-based organizations, which are being promoted as poverty fighters by the Bush Administration (Bush 2001), are also seen as sources of social capital (Ammerman 1997; Greeley 1997a; Saguaro Seminar 2000; Wuthnow 2002). What is needed is a more specific and nuanced understanding of the importance of social ties (the “bridges”) in poverty-to-work programs for the

transmission of valuable resources (the “cargo”), and the difference that faith brings to faith-based versions of these programs.

The data in this paper derives from a review of the scholarly literature and from my comparative study of six secular and faith-based poverty-to-work programs (Lockhart 2001a). “Poverty-to-work” is a broader term than “welfare-to-work” and includes programs working with the homeless, delinquent child-support providers, and other low-income persons in efforts to help the clients leave poverty by the means of employment. These programs are part of a growing federal trend towards employment (Blank 1997; Diller 2000; Glazer 1994; Mead 1997; Sandefur and Cook 1998).

My research was funded through dissertation grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Louisville Institute and two other research centers. The field research involved interviews and field observations of three secular poverty-to-work programs and three faith-based poverty-to-work programs in two medium Southeastern cities. Clients served include persons who were homeless, victims of domestic violence, parents under court orders for delinquency in child support payments, TANF recipients who were near or exceeded their deadlines, and other low-income persons who volunteered for program services. The secular programs included a redesigned government agency, a nonprofit organization and a for-profit organization, all with government contracts. The faith-based programs chosen for investigation were explicitly religious to contrast sharply with each paired secular programs. As many researchers have now noticed, faith-based organizations vary greatly in how much and in what ways religion is involved in their organization and programming (Monsma and Mounts 2002; Sherman 2000; Unruh 1999). Using a new consensus terminology

(Working Group 2002), the faith-based sites I visited could be considered “faith-saturated” for they incorporated many religious practices in their efforts. Monsma found that 9.6% of welfare-to-work programs integrate faith into their programs. An additional 14.4% of programs are faith-based, but segment religious activities from these programs (Monsma and Mounts 2002)¹.

The Need for Bridges

As illustrated in figure 1 below, Granovetter described the importance of social ties in finding employment in his classic article, “The Strength of Weak Ties” (1973). He argued that more helpful employment information is transmitted through weak social ties than strong ones, due to the fact that these ties extend farther and into different networks of information. Others have noted that these networks need to extend up in social hierarchies for maximum assistance (Burt 2000; Lin 1999; Newman 1999).

The poor are often excluded from employment markets due to geographical isolation and subsequent cultural isolation (Wacquant and Wilson 1989; Wilson 1996), and by the stereotypes employers have of people who live in such communities (Moss and Tilly 2001). In addition, the poor may be excluded from better jobs due to discrimination and work-force behavioral requirements (Piore 1970). Piore and others distinguish between primary sector employment with jobs that provide good pay and benefits from secondary sector employment with low pay and few, if any, benefits. (These distinctions are shown in the figure 2 as E for good jobs and e for poor jobs.)

As program material and field observations give evidence, poverty-to-work programs act as bridges which connect poor people with potential quality employment situations. These programs create and mobilize social ties for the benefit of their clients.

These social ties must often cross barriers of race, class, and gender,² and such ties help distinguish “bridging” social capital or ties from “bonding” social ties which further connect people with shared identities (Putnam 2000; Saguaro Seminar 2000; Warren, Thompson, and Saegert 2001; Wuthnow 2002).

Trust is often developed as an element of these bridging social ties, but should not be assumed due to the wariness people have of social barriers. People who communicate across social barriers and build trust are key “bridge-builders” in these programs.³

Additional Cargo

Employment information is one of several resources provided clients in poverty-to-work programs over the bridges of social ties created by these programs. Additional resources include material goods and services, training to develop human and cultural capital, social support, and status.

After verifying the financial difficulties of their clients, poverty-to-work programs often provide either directly or through referrals material resources for the survival of their clients and for assisting them in getting to job interviews and to work. Such assistance can include food, shelter, utilities, clothing (including an “interview outfit” and sometimes uniforms or work clothes), transportation and child care.

To help clients to qualify for better employment positions, the programs provide or refer their clients to educational settings such as GED programs and computer skill classes where clients can gain the needed “hard skills”.

The “soft skills” of how to positively relate to customers, co-workers and supervisors is becoming increasingly important (Moss and Tilly 2001), and is often taught “in-house” by poverty-to-work programs with other “life-skills” such as time

management and personal financial management. Akin to cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), these skills enable clients to survive and thrive in the primary sector work world.

Although Granovetter stresses the strengths of “weak ties,” strong ties of supportive relationships can help clients through lifestyle transitions and the difficulties of making ends meet and persisting in the job market (Hurlbert, Haines, and Beggs 2000; Newman 1999; Seccombe 1999). Five of the six programs I investigated specifically created peer support groups or other warm, relational group settings to promote mutual encouragement. The sixth program focused not on group support, but individual warm (but professional) support between clients and staff members. All of these programs breathe a very different and warmer air than the distrustful and impersonal bureaucratic environments often found in public welfare programs of the 1980s and early 1990s. Leaders cited lower case loads as a key element in providing these more personal and supportive services.

Lastly, the associations produced by these poverty-to-work programs can also improve the status of the clients, for those who are associated with positively viewed persons or organizations can share in that positive status (Milner 1994). Thus if a poverty-to-work program is seen as reputable in the community, providing quality, prepared clients and referrals, others referred by this program will also be highly regarded and may perhaps gain an advantage in the job market.

In addition to these above resources, faith-based programs may also provide training in religious capital, such as knowledge and skills in sacred texts, theology and worship practices (Iannaccone 1990), which can then be used to help clients build social ties in religious congregations and obtain resources through these ties (Lockhart 2001b).

Alternative Bridge Designs: Professional Services and Congregational Networks

To provide job information and information about clients, bridges must be made from clients to employers⁴. To provide the additional cargos, bridges must be made from clients to program staff members and to other social service providers.

Currently there appears to be two basic structural models for these bridges: the first is the classic social worker model with roots back in the “friendly visitors” of the Charity Organization Societies (Cnaan 1999). In this model, professionally trained workers (often called job developers) build relationships directly with both clients and potential employers (see figure 3). In the second “congregational networks” model (see figure 4), job developers and other volunteers from congregations work with employers, but also build ties with members of religious congregations to access employment information from their formal and informal networks.

The secular programs I observed all used the professional model. In contrast, the faith-based organizations I studied all utilized the congregational networks model, seeking to expand the employment information networks of their staff with those found in congregations. Congregations were seen as sites located in low-income neighborhoods, yet composed of people of differing incomes and with connections with diverse employment locations and levels. They were also seen as places to provide on-going social support. However a review of faith-based poverty program descriptions (such as Sherman 2000) demonstrates that not all faith-based organizations have converted to this congregational networks model.

Volunteers are key elements in the congregational networks models. Monsma reports that faith-based programs that integrate religion in their programming utilized a

median number of 13.5 volunteers each month compared to secular programs' 4 volunteers per month, and none reported by government and for-profit programs (Monsma and Mounts 2002: 25). My observations showed that volunteers provided the full range of resources from social support to employment contacts to food and emergency child-care⁵. Clients were taught to access this range of resources through congregational networks related to the faith-based programs.

Unfortunately research has not yet determined the comparative effectiveness of either model. Can congregational networks be more helpful than professional services? Utilizing the nationally representative National Congregations Study, Foley, McCarthy and Chaves provide evidence that congregations located in very poor communities “remain socioeconomically heterogeneous, with all the advantages in terms of greater and more diverse social capital that status entails” (2001: 220). Yet these researchers also note that congregations heavily composed of low-income participants tend to be smaller and less linked to both local and national networks than those of more mixed income (221). To mend these gaps, many faith-based advocates (Carlson 1999; Perkins 1995; Perkins and Kadlecsek 1995; Sherman 1997; Sherman 1998; Sherman and Carlson 1999; Sider 1999; Sider, Olson, and Unruh 2002) promote partnerships, including suburban-urban church linkages, which reach beyond individual congregations to networks of congregations, crossing denominational, racial, economic and geographic divisions. All of the faith-based programs I investigated were built from such partnerships. Connections with multi-congregational networks may provide a richer range of resources for clients due to the diversities within and between congregations. However congregational networks may be limited due to class composition, geographical location,

religious barriers (some self-imposed), concerns about church-state relations, institutional stability and the internal structure, orientation and politics of congregations which make up these networks (Demerath, Hall, Schmitt, and Williams 1998).

Bridge-Builders and Their Techniques

Bridge builders are those with the skills and willingness to help build bridges across social barriers. They typically know at least two “worlds” and can help people from one world understand the other. For poverty-to-work programs, bridge builders need to understand the experience of employers, employees and job seekers, the ways of local social services and government programs, and the experience and perspectives of the poor and those from both the majority and the minority racial communities. In addition, those active in faith-based programs also need to be able to deal with denominational distinctives including varying theology, congregational government, worship styles and lifestyle emphases. The managers, staff and most of the volunteers I met in my research demonstrated bridge-building abilities.

Such abilities may come from training. All of the managers of poverty-to-work programs I investigated had gained professional training in social work, ministry or business human relations, yet had also built or maintained ties with minority and low-income people. Being professionals, their linkages to professionals in other social services and in places of employment may also be higher in organizational hierarchies and thus more effective than those of non-professionals (Lin 1999), yet their bridge-building role requires them to maintain the ability to relate to their low-income clients (Amato-von Hemert 1998; Venkatesh 1997). Professional training can include techniques for bridging social barriers, but the professional life can also build class

barriers (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 2000; Sample 1984). Future research could compare the relative effectiveness of different forms of training on the building of social ties and the effectiveness of programs run by those with different training.

Although controversial with regard to federally funded programs, all the faith-based programs I investigated required a faith commitment of their staff and volunteers. Requiring this reinforced the faith element of these programs (Glenn 2000). Faith connections may also bridge faith-based programs with employers who value such faith, yet may also serve as barriers with employers and other professionals who do not (Cnaan 1999; Foley, McCarthy, and Chaves 2001).

Techniques I observed to build trust include presenting warmth, empathy and respect, taking time to build relationships, utilizing communication skills to maximize understanding. Bridge builders also sought to help both sides understand each other. For example, programs would often put clients into role plays where they take on the role of a supervisor and in doing so, come to understand their perspectives. They also communicate both the realities of the difficulties of the job search and yet provide hope, encouragement and positive motivation. Humor and humility help much in building ties and keeping attitudes positive.

The faith-based programs also demonstrated significantly more vulnerability and humility with their clients by admitting their mistakes and frustrations. This emphasis on vulnerability is evidently derived from their theology put into practice that “we are all people who make mistakes, but that God forgives us and gives us the ability to try again.” The staff persons' vulnerability does not make them lesser persons, but rather “witnesses to God’s grace” and “signposts of what mistakes can be made.” Clients were

consequently able to admit their vulnerability and concerns as well, which strengthened social ties and helped staff members to focus better on problem areas.

Summary

Although social capital is a debated term, the importance of social ties in poverty-to-work programs should not be ignored. These social ties are needed to provide many diverse resources to clients including employment information, material goods and services, training to develop “hard” and “soft” skills, social support and status. In addition faith-based organizations provide formal and informal religious instruction that can help clients to further access religious networks for resources.

The structure of social ties in secular programs is typically that of professional services with ties developed between clients and professionally trained staff members. Sometimes these ties are supplemented with peer support groups. Faith-based programs may mirror this arrangement, but they may also utilize a congregational network model where volunteers from local religious congregations are used to extend social ties into local congregations to gain additional resources for the clients. The comparative effectiveness of each model has yet to be determined.

Bridge-builders, who can help connect people over social divides, typically have experience or training that transcends relevant social barriers. They utilize many techniques to help build bridges and effectively transmit the relevant resources.

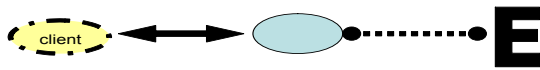
Vulnerability and a willingness to forgive particularly marked the faith-based programs.

Certainly in these time of policy experimentation, further research needs to be done on all the varying aspects of these programs and their impact on the lives of their clients.

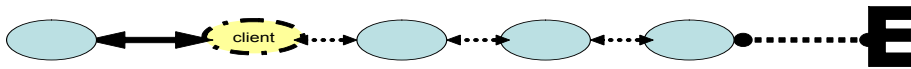
Figure 1: Social ties for gaining employment

Social ties for gaining employment

- Strong ties and employment



- Granovetter (1973) “The Strength of Weak Ties”



E=primary sector employment; e= secondary sector employment; the double lines represents cultural and social barriers. Dotted lines represent “weak ties”, solid lines “strong ties”

Figure 2: Poverty and social ties for employment

Poverty creates barriers to social ties for employment

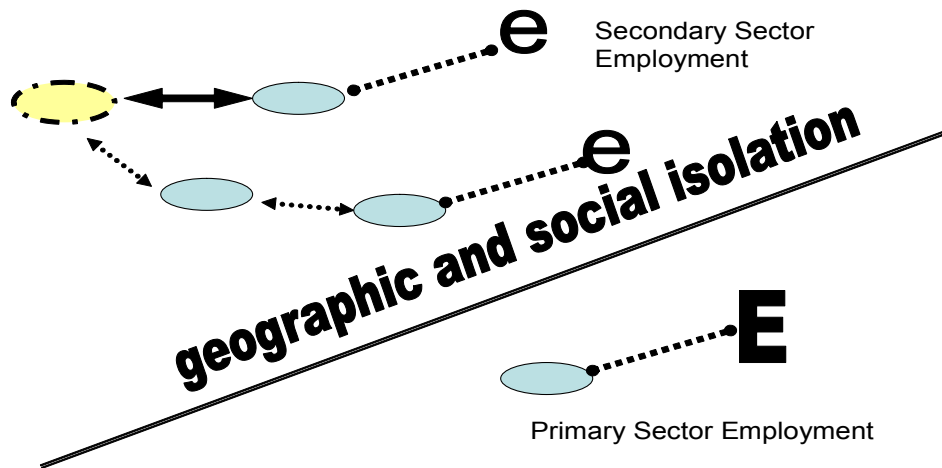
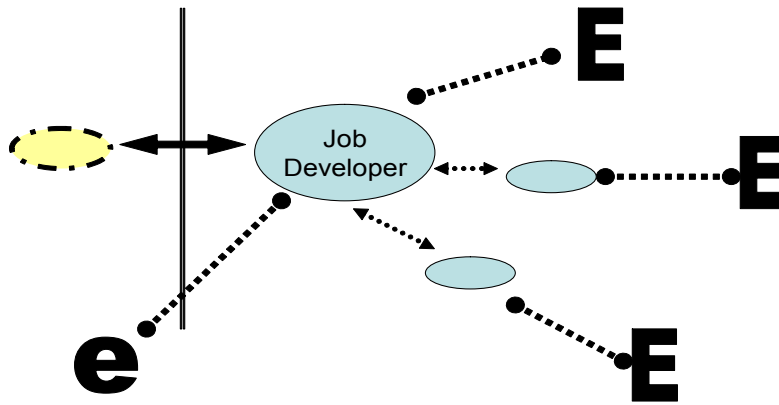


Figure 3: Professional services and network ties

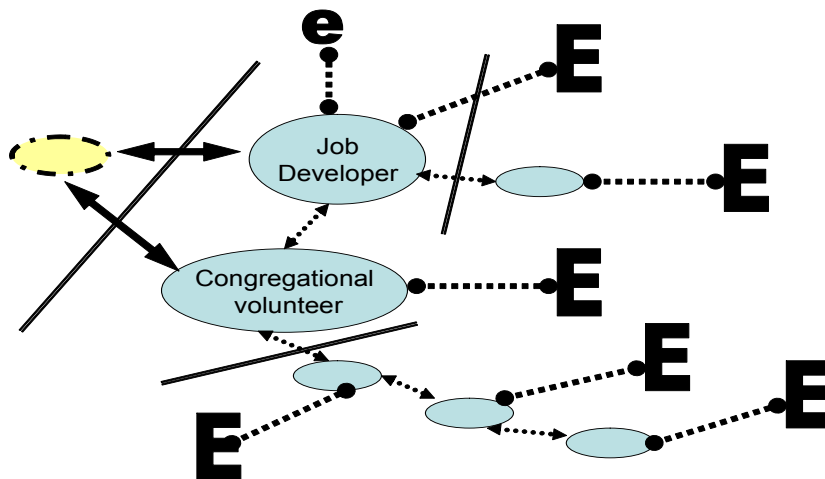
Professional Services' social ties for gaining employment



E=primary sector employment; e= secondary sector employment; the double lines represents cultural and social barriers. Dotted lines represent "weak ties", solid lines "strong ties"

Figure 4: Congregational Networks and employment ties

Congregational Networks and Employment



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End Notes

¹ These figures are from their study of 509 welfare-to-work programs in Philadelphia, Chicago, Dallas and Los Angeles. 25% of the programs who responded were run by governments, 45.8% were run by secular non-profit organizations, and 5.2% by for-profit organizations.

² The editors of *Social Capital and Poor Communities*, note the need in social capital building strategies for “recognizing the leadership of women, confronting the racial order, and challenging the cultural consensus on poverty” (Warren, Thompson, and Saegert 2001: 19-23). The poverty-to-work programs I observed dealt with all three of these for they all had women and African-Americans in leadership and they all respected the dignity of their clients and other poor persons, as described below.

³ This building of trust appears to be crucial for the transforming of social ties into social capital, as defined by Coleman, Putnam and others. For without trust (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995; Putnam 2000) or at least membership ties and shared norms (Bourdieu 1986), the social relationships will not provide benefits for those who participate in them.

⁴ Although most of my discussion focuses on clients finding employers to gain employment, during economic growth periods, such as during the bulk of my research period, employers may be actively seeking potential employees. Even during slow periods, employers need employees to fill retirements and other employee loss.

⁵ No evaluation is made here on the quality or quantity of the resources provided by volunteers compared to professional staff persons. For example congregational networks may provide many job leads, but professional job developers may have job connections that are higher up in the business hierarchy or more effective in providing employment.