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Spatial Logics:
The Politics of Place in Faith-Based Social Service Provision

by

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ABSTRACT

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Prior research indicates that faith-based social service organizations are unique in their propensity to locate in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Yet, we have little understanding of how such organizations understand the significance of place in their operation. I draw on 12 months of ethnographic observation and interviews with 24 key informants in two faith-based social service organizations in Houston, Texas to interrogate how organizations articulate a spatial logic for their work and how conceptions of place shape service provision. I identify two types of spatial logics: a people-centric logic that imbues place with significance based on proximity to a target demographic community, and a place-centric logic that prioritizes service to a specific geographic area. Both types of spatial meanings are shaped not only by religious convictions, but also through relationships with key constituent groups. These spatial logics subsequently shape the ways that agencies use space to attract certain populations and deter others.

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In the U.S., alleviating problems associated with concentrated urban disadvantage has been on the public and scholarly agenda for decades. One area of concern has been the lack of organizational resources—like grocery stores, childcare centers, and human service organizations—available in many poor communities (Wilson 1987). Given this reality, some policymakers have argued for channeling people *out* of the disadvantaged communities (Oakley and Fraser 2016). This line of thinking undergirded revitalization programs like HOPE VI or Moving to Opportunity (MTO), which attempted to de-concentrate poverty by providing opportunities for families to move out of impoverished neighborhoods and into communities with a greater level of resources (US Department of Housing and Urban Development 2000). Conversely, other lawmakers have argued for channeling resources *into* disadvantaged communities. This logic spurred the devolution of the U.S. welfare system over the past 20 years, reforms designed to strengthen the safety net within underserved neighborhoods (Tach and Edin 2017).

Amid these debates and programs, the provision of human services has changed noticeably, as Congress has dismantled many cash assistance programs to fund the work of community-based organizations (Danziger 2010; Edin and Lein 1998). Although researchers still debate the legacy of such reform (Wilson 2017), numerous studies investigate how an increasingly privatized welfare state affects disadvantaged communities. Some scholars have explored the political dimensions of devolution, highlighting the ways that organizations in low-income neighborhoods serve as political machines (Marwell 2004) or de-facto political representatives (Levine 2016). Other work argues that organizations matter not only in the resources they provide, but also by their mere presence. Recent research shows that
organizational density is positively associated with a community’s collective efficacy as well as 
levels of neighborhood activism (Gilster 2017; Sampson 2013).

Connecting the disadvantaged to community organizations, however, has not proved to 
be as simple as moving resources into poor communities. As scholars have demonstrated, social 
service agencies are often not located in poor communities (Allard 2009). Further, 
neighborhoods with a high proportion of black or Latino residents often have fewer human 
service organizations than predominantly white communities (Anderson 2017), and 
organizations that are located in black communities are more likely to disband over time 
(Garrow 2015; Garrow and Garrow 2014). The geographic disconnect between service providers 
and needy communities has fostered increased interest in the work of faith-based organizations 
(FBOs), which are often overrepresented in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Botchwey 2007; 
Graddy and Ye 2006; Kearns 2006). Nonetheless, despite considerable evidence of geographic 
disparities in access to organizational resources, scholars can only speculate about the factors 
that shape where organizations choose to locate (e.g., Garrow and Hasenfeld 2012a).

Indeed, authors have not explicitly considered the “spatial logics”—or the ways that 
organizations make sense of where they are geographically located—employed by service 
agencies themselves. These spatial logics matter because they interface with the longstanding 
debate of whether to bring resources to the needy or the needy to resources, but also because 
where organizations locate matters, not only for neighborhood level outcomes (Joassart-Marcelli 
and Giordano 2006) but also for whether disadvantaged populations are able to utilize services 
(Kissane 2010). While numerous studies interrogate the role of organizations in marginalized 
communities (e.g., Small, Jacobs, and Massengill 2008) or the spatial disconnects between 
service agencies and poor neighborhoods (e.g., Marwell and Gullickson 2013), few studies
explore the connections between the two. Therefore, we know little about *why* organizations locate themselves in certain communities and *how* understandings of place affect service provision.

To explore these two questions, I draw on an ethnographic study of two faith-based social service organizations—located in neighborhoods with different poverty rates—in Houston, Texas. I focus specifically on the case of FBOs, or “religiously influenced” organizations that provide social services (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013), because of their overrepresentation in many poor communities (Graddy and Ye 2006), a fact that has served as a justification for their increased involvement in the US social safety net. I find that organizations articulate different types of spatial logics: one agency imbues place with significance based on proximity to a target demographic community while the other prioritizes service to a specific geographic area. Yet, these distinct logics—which are constructed through relationships among service recipients, donors, and volunteers--- are similarly utilized to attract key stakeholders and deter populations deemed less-than-deserving. The results have implications for understanding both the role and place of human service organizations, particularly those that are faith-based, in the changing urban landscape.

**ORGANIZATIONS AND URBAN INEQUALITY**

While scholars have long speculated about how organizations shape life in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Du Bois 1899), recent work calls for greater scholarly attention to the ways that organizations affect neighborhood-level outcomes (Marwell and McQuarrie 2013; Sampson 2013). Such scholarship proceeds from a conceptualization of organizations as community-level *resources*: resources that “are central to the opportunities, choices, and outcomes of the urban poor” (Allard and Small 2013: 10), but also resources that are often not found in low-income
neighborhoods. The latter assumption—that disadvantaged communities lack the kind of organizational resources (e.g., businesses) that might promote social mobility—was a core tenet of Wilson’s (1987) theory of concentrated disadvantage. Small and McDermott (2006) problematize this assumption by demonstrating that impoverished neighborhoods often have more local businesses than wealthier communities, but the authors also find that this positive association is reversed as the proportion of black residents increases.

Research suggests that organizational density matters, particularly when it comes to human service organizations (Gilster 2017). Sampson (2013), for example, finds an association between organizational density and positive neighborhood-level outcomes, like collective efficacy. In Sampson’s conceptualization, organizations “generate a web of ‘mundane’ routine activities that can lubricate collective life” (371). Organizations also connect disadvantaged populations to resources. As pointed out by recent scholarship, human service organizations often take on advocacy roles in marginalized communities in order to bring resources into the neighborhood (Levine 2016; Marwell 2004) and foster network ties that help community members connect with resources outside the community (Small et al. 2008).

Moving People to Resources

Given the benefits of organizational density for community life, one strategy advocated by policymakers for connecting the disadvantaged to resources was to move people out of poor neighborhoods where disadvantage was highly concentrated (Wilson 1987), and into communities with better schools, more businesses, and a greater number of human services. The de-concentration efforts of initiatives like Hope VI and MTO were built on the idea that the one-time, large-scale dispersal of people across neighborhoods could help facilitate upward mobility for disadvantaged families (Oakley and Fraser 2016). Critics of these initiatives suggest that
neoliberalism, which emphasizes market-based solutions to addressing urban disadvantage, drove the veiled attempts at “positive” gentrification (Chaskin and Joseph 2013) and that movement to wealthier neighborhoods did not necessarily lead to better outcomes for poor families (Chaskin 2016). Other authors (Tach and Emory 2017) highlight the improvement of neighborhoods with revitalized public housing while also noting that such changes were primarily driven by the displacement of poor, non-white populations.

Moving Resources to People

Moving people to resources has not been the only strategy utilized by lawmakers to address the problem of concentrated disadvantage. Since the mid-1990s, policymakers have increasingly prioritized providing government assistance to poor populations through local organizations rather than cash assistance programs (Tach and Edin 2017). Despite some variability across states, roughly 60 percent of all government welfare funding goes to local organizations (Allard 2009). Unlike large-scale de-concentration initiatives, social service agencies interface with the poor on a regular basis, allowing them to better recognize local needs and serve as advocates for neighborhood members (Allard and Small 2013).

Faith-based organizations proved to be one of the main beneficiaries of welfare reforms because, in the minds of policymakers, they exemplified the kind of local organizations that would be highly attentive to local needs (Edin and Lein 1998). Through the “Charitable Choice” provision, government funding can be granted to religious organizations for the provision of social services (Bartkowski and Regis 2003). Additionally, President Trump’s executive order establishing the “White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative” argues that FBOs have a capacity for service provision “that often exceeds that of government” (Trump 2018: para. 2).
Access to organizations. However, as recent studies (Anderson 2017; Kissane 2010) highlight, moving resources to poor people has not always meant moving resources into poor neighborhoods through local organizations. Allard (2009) finds that most social service organizations are not in poor communities; roughly two-thirds are in communities with low- or moderate-levels of poverty. Further, more than one-third of service agencies are in neighborhoods with poverty rates of less than 10 percent. While patterns of organizational access vary across urban areas (Kearns 2006; Peck 2007), spatial disparities are only exacerbated in cities with considerable urban sprawl (Allard 2009).

But, as some authors note (Kissane 2010; Lee 2017), organizational access is not simply a matter of proximity. Rather, social service utilization is patterned by neighborhood-level characteristics like crime rate, public transit infrastructure, and ethno-racial composition. For example, while Allard (2009) measures nearby access based on a three-mile radius, respondents in Kissane’s (2010) study report that even a service provider a mile away might be too far away for them to visit if they do not have access to a car. Kissane also finds that disadvantaged populations often avoid visiting service agencies in communities heavily populated by racial or ethnic out-groups, even if such organizations are nearby.

Race and organizational access. While the relationship between neighborhood poverty rate and organizational accessibility varies across urban areas, scholars consistently find that predominantly black communities have less access to services than neighborhoods populated by other racial or ethnic groups (Anderson 2017; Garrow 2015; Joassart-Marcelli and Giordano 2006). The racial and ethnic composition of a neighborhood also matters for organizational vitality. Research suggests that human service organizations located in neighborhoods with a high proportion of black or Latino residents are more likely to disband over time (Garrow and
Garrow 2014; Lee 2017). Scholars offer several potential explanations for these racialized trends in disbandment, including racial discrimination (Anderson 2017) and the possibility that residents of such neighborhoods prefer utilizing nontraditional service providers, like churches or kin networks (Lee 2017). It is notable that all the aforementioned studies infer such explanations based on neighborhood or organizational characteristics, rather than organizational self-reports. Therefore, we do not how human service agencies themselves make sense of their proximity to, or distance from, black and Latino neighborhoods.

Access and Faith-Based Organizations

Despite these trends, scholars note that one type of organization tends to be overrepresented in poor communities: faith-based organizations (Graddy and Ye 2006). One study of disadvantaged neighborhoods in Philadelphia found that 71 percent of human service organizations in such communities were religiously affiliated (Botchwey 2007). Kearns (2006) similarly notes that FBOs provide a “disproportionately high” number of social services in the poorest communities (see also Reingold et al. 2007). Scholars suggest that these trends result not only from the accessibility of FBOs in low-income communities, but also because faith-based organizations often have fewer requirements for assistance than other service providers (Hughes 2018). Yet, while much has been written about the role of Charitable Choice on religious congregations (e.g., Chaves and Eagle 2016), considerably less scholarship has considered the work of faith-based nonprofit organizations. This organizational type is especially relevant given their specialization in poverty alleviation efforts (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013), a fact that has led many congregations to outsource their service efforts by providing funding and volunteers for such “parachurch” agencies (Bartkowski and Regis 2003).

TOWARD ORGANIZATIONAL FIELDS & THEIR SPATIAL LOGICS
Organizational Fields

In thinking about how human service organizations connect with the people and places they serve, recent scholarship in both urban and organizational sociology emphasizes that we should think of organizations not as isolated entities but instead as embedded within larger organizational fields (Wooten and Hoffman 2016). Such fields consist of interdependent agencies oriented toward a common purpose, together with their multiple stakeholders (Bartley 2007). Scholars utilizing an institutional field approach often explore inter-organizational dynamics within a given field—including the ways that organizations might compete with one another for resources (Gibbons 2015)—but recent work more narrowly examines organizational relationships with particular constituent groups, including public officials (LeRoux 2007) or philanthropic foundations (Quinn, Tompkins-Strange, and Meyerson 2013). Examining such specific sets of relationships, or “fields within a field,” can help shed light on how social service organizations balance commitments to different constituent groups, especially donors, volunteers, and the populations they serve.

In particular, recent work suggests that the influence of donors on social service organizations should not be underestimated (Bartley 2007; Quinn, Tompkins-Strange, and Meyerson 2013). Many service organizations—particularly FBOs—rely heavily on foundations, individual donors, and in-kind donations to support their work, a reality that can influence the nature of service provision (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013). Bartley (2007), for example, argues that philanthropic foundations can function as “field-builders” by leveraging their resources to create new organizational fields oriented toward solving a social issue. Financial dependence on the foundation subsequently leads organizations in the field to become more alike over time.
Fields, once fully established, also exert a homogenizing force on organizations within the field. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) famously labeled this homogenizing process as “institutional isomorphism.” Recent work extends their insights by highlighting the cultural dimensions of isomorphism, as organizations become more alike not only due to structural constraints (e.g., similar funding sources), but also because of “rationalized myths” in society about how organizations in a given field should function (Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2016). The fact that FBOs are more likely than non-religious service providers to be in poor communities (Kearns 2006) provides evidence that the cultural beliefs about what constitutes “proper” poverty alleviation might be unique for religious organizations. Indeed, given the fact that many religious traditions place a strong emphasis on caring for the poor (Cnaan 2006), FBOs might be considered a “most likely” case to locate in disadvantaged neighborhoods for ideological reasons. Scholars, however, have not explicitly explored the myths that shape where FBOs decide to locate.

Isomorphism in organizational fields is not an inevitability; recent work highlights the ways that heterogeneity emerges among organizations doing similar work (Skelcher and Smith 2014). One potential driver of heterogeneity is neighborhood context. An organization’s geographic location can shape its institutional goals, services, and levels of competition with other agencies (Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2016; Gibbons 2015). Embeddedness in a poor community can also shape organizational advocacy efforts, as Garrow and Hasenfeld (2012a) find a positive association between organizational residence in a disadvantaged community and reported levels of advocacy. Yet, being located in a disadvantaged neighborhood can also have detrimental effects on organizational longevity. Walker and McCarthy (2010) note that “local”
sources of support in poor communities are often resource-deprived, meaning that organizations in such communities must intentionally foster extralocal ties to remain viable.

**Institutional and Spatial Logics**

To help understand how organizations make decisions within a broader field, scholars often highlight the *institutional logics* that guide organizational behavior (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). According to this perspective, institutions organize themselves around a set of material practices and symbolic constructions that are manifested in the actions and beliefs of actors embedded in the organization (Skelcher and Smith 2014). This does not preclude multiple or competing logics within an organization (Reay and Hinings 2009). Skelcher and Smith (2014) argue that nonprofit organizations are often “hybrids,” in that they are beset by competing logics.

This might be especially true for religious nonprofits. Various (Alford and Friedland 1995; Thornton et al. 2012) formulations of the institutional logics approach argue that the religious sector of society maintains a unique logic, distinct from other sectors like “the state” or “the market.” Yet, the ability of FBOs to receive federal funding has blurred the lines between religious institutions and the state (LeRoux 2007) and the privatization of the social safety net has introduced market logics into social service provision (Garrow and Hasenfeld 2012b). Therefore, while we know that religious organizations are disproportionately represented in poor communities, we do not know if FBOs locate themselves in poor communities for religious reasons. McRoberts (2003), for example, suggests that religious institutions often locate in poor neighborhoods to take advantage of low property values.

Research on institutional logics often does not explicitly interrogate *why* organizations locate where they do. One exception is a study by Garrow and Hasenfeld (2012a), who adopt such an approach to argue that nonprofit organizations espouse a “moral” institutional logic that
is expressed not only in their services but also in their decision of where to locate (their “location decision”). While Garrow and Hasenfeld do find an association between organizational location and engagement in advocacy, their analysis assumes that location decisions are a primary means by which organizations express their “moral frame” and thus the content of advocacy is shaped by ideological convictions. Allard (2009) also speculates on what shapes location decisions, including proximity to sources of revenue, affordability, availability of space, and the willingness of local residents to tolerate service recipients. Like Garrow and Hasenfeld (2012a), Allard conceptualizes a “location decision” as a one-time occurrence without exploring how organizations continue to make sense of their location over time.

Given these gaps in the research, for the present study I pursue the answers to two questions. First, I investigate how social service agencies make sense of their geographic location, particularly their proximity to needy communities. Exploring such spatial logics helps shed light not only on the structure of the contemporary social safety net, but also how organizations imagine themselves to be connecting people to resources. And second, I explore how understandings of place shape service provision. While existing work provides descriptive evidence of spatial disparities between service providers and needy communities, it does not interrogate how organizational actors conceptualize and use space within their work (Gotham and Brumley 2002). Such a question has important implications for understanding how organizations shape—and are shaped by—the communities in which they work.

METHODS

To examine these questions, I draw on original data from an ethnographic project comparing two faith-based social service agencies in Houston, Texas. Data collection included 12 months of participant observation¹ and interviews with 24 key informants conducted in 2017-
2018. I conducted observations through my role as a volunteer at both agencies, as my work included serving in the food pantry, answering phone calls, interviewing recipients, and teaching computer skills. The volunteer shifts typically lasted between one and five hours.

The location of the study, Houston, was an ideal context to explore spatial dynamics given its status as a rapidly-growing and racially diverse city marked by urban sprawl. The sprawl, when coupled with the city’s comparatively limited public transit infrastructure (Yi 2006), makes it a place where organizational proximity to poor neighborhoods is most likely to matter. I specifically explored the case of FBOs because they remain overrepresented in disadvantaged communities (e.g., Botchwey 2007), even as more service organizations have shifted towards working in wealthy communities (Marwell and Gullickson 2013), thus allowing me to interrogate whether FBOs draw on religious frames in making sense of their location.

Case Selection

After mapping the location of more than 100 social service providers in Houston, I identified target neighborhoods in the city with different poverty rates and contacted social service organizations in those zip codes. I then met with representatives from nine different faith-based agencies and volunteered at four of them, before selecting the two agencies with the most similar services in the most different communities (Flyvbjerg 2006). The two organizations in the study share a similar religious identity, prioritize similar services, and have never received funding from the government, but they differ in one key way: one is located in a community with a high poverty rate and the other in a community with a low poverty rate. Both would be classified as “faith-integrated” agencies (Allard 2009), in that they “indicate frequent use of prayer, religious viewpoints, or religious principles during service delivery” (128).
Utilizing a comparative design has two primary advantages. First, comparing how two otherwise similar organizations in the same organizational field make sense of being located in very different communities allows me to explore whether the organizations utilize similar logics—perhaps due to religious convictions or isomorphic pressure—or different logics. As I outline above, these logics have important implications for understanding how inequality is reproduced in the contemporary social safety net. Second, a comparative design allows for sensitivity to the role of place in service provision. In particular, examining organizations in “most different” communities allowed me to explore how neighborhoods might affect organizations, as well as how organizations might affect neighborhoods.

*Samaritan Ministries*

The first agency, which I call Samaritan Ministries to ensure the confidentiality of its members, is a Christian organization that was founded by a coalition of Southern Baptist churches in 1960. The organization’s religious identity is readily evident in its name, promotional materials, and website. The agency itself is relatively small, with only 9 full- or part-time staff members across two locations in the city. Four of the staff members—including the executive director—are white, four are Hispanic, and the other is African American. The organization has never received government funding and is mostly financed by local churches and individual donors. The agency’s services, which include a food pantry, youth programs, and a homeless ministry, are not restricted to individuals in certain zip codes. While Samaritan leaders emphasized the holistic nature of their services, they often identified the food pantry as their primary service.

Although Samaritan has two locations in the city of Houston, I conducted my observations at their main location. The focal site’s neighborhood is a historically Hispanic
enclave where many immigrants from Mexico and Central America reside. According to 2015 American Community Survey estimates, 63.9 percent of residents in the zip code are Hispanic and 7.5 percent are black or African American (US Census Bureau 2015). The community has a poverty rate of 26.1 percent and a median income of $46,061. The neighborhood’s median income has grown steadily in recent years, which has incited fears about the future displacement of current residents. These concerns came up often in my fieldwork, as even Samaritan’s website references a local landscape that is “changing as old homes are being torn down and replaced with modern townhouses and condos.”

**Hope Charities**

The second organization, which I call Hope Charities (HC), is another Christian organization founded in the late 1970s by a collection of Mainline Protestant churches. Like Samaritan, HC maintains a strong religious identity informed by its ongoing partnerships with local Protestant and Catholic churches. Organizational leaders and volunteers, many of whom attend the partner churches, are predominantly white and female. HC’s programs are primarily funded by a combination of in-kind donations, individual donors, and charitable foundations, rather than government grants. The organization’s services include a food pantry, financial assistance, youth programs, and job training. Like members of Samaritan, leaders at HC consistently identified the food pantry as their most important service. Unlike Samaritan, all of HC’s basic services are zip code restricted, meaning that only residents of 29 zip codes in Houston can receive food, clothing, or financial assistance at the agency. The zip codes are racially and socioeconomically diverse; twelve have poverty rates greater than 25 percent and ten have poverty rates of less than 10 percent. Samaritan’s main location is not located in one of the 29 zip codes served by HC.
HC also has two locations in Houston, but I conducted my observations and key informant interviews at their main location. The zip code for this location has a poverty rate of 7.5 percent and a median income of $88,471 (US Census Bureau 2015). Unlike Samaritan’s neighborhood, HC’s neighborhood has undergone minimal demographic change over the past 30 years. The neighborhood itself is predominantly white, as 2015 estimates suggest that 14.9 percent of residents are Hispanic and four percent are black or African American.

I identified key informants through my observations and conducted semi-structured interviews with a variety of actors in each organization, including the executive directors, staff members, volunteers, board members, interns, and service recipients. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. I utilized a prepared interview guide covering a variety of topics, including views of the local community, conceptualizations of neighborhood problems, and the perceived importance of the agency’s location. In particular, each interview respondent was asked “why do you think the organization is located in this community?” Prior literature suggests that agencies might draw on several rationales to make sense of their location, including moral values (Garrow and Hasenfeld 2012a), proximity to needy populations (Graddy and Ye 2006), and access to support networks (Allard 2009). I adapted these potential explanations from the prior literature as analytic categories to systematically code how members of each organization articulated a rationale (spatial logic) for the agency’s geographic location. Such a modified inductive approach to analysis, a strategy often used in work on institutional logics (Skelcher and Smith 2014), was ideal given the speculative nature of past work on “location decisions.”

After creating and clarifying a set of spatial logics based on interview responses, I coded all the interview and observational data using ATLAS.ti to explore how such logics shaped
service provision, as well as how they differed across the two cases in the study. In doing so, I became aware of the similarities and differences in how respondents from each agency conceptualized and “used” space in their work (Gotham and Brumley 2002). I was also attentive to the ways that race shaped perceptions of place within each organization, as both HC and Samaritan are predominantly white organizations serving predominantly black and Latino clients. While in most cases organizational actors might have little idea of why an organization is in a certain neighborhood, both agencies reported recent discussions about the possibility of moving. This reality allowed me to fruitfully ask questions about the importance of place, as members of both organizations were aware of the benefits and disadvantages of their location.

RESULTS

Constructing “the Community”

For workers at Samaritan Ministries, physical location was an important aspect of their identity as a neighborhood organization. Organization members imbued their geographic location with moral significance based on conceptions of their target ethnic, or demographic, “community” for service. In other words, Samaritan workers saw themselves as serving a demographic group (a people), rather than a geographic area (a place). As one white, female, volunteer rhetorically asked, “how can you serve those who are low-income and impoverished…if you are not where they need you to be?” Staff members and volunteers suggested that they “needed” to be in the community to accomplish their mission, and some drew on a religious logic to explain the importance of organizational proximity to the disadvantaged. “When Jesus came, he came to the poorest of poor,” one African American volunteer explained. He went on to suggest that it would be pointless to have a social service organization in a nearby neighborhood known for its affluent residents, which—unbeknownst to him—also happens to be
the neighborhood where HC is located. “Why would we put a center like this in Kentwood?” asked, “it would serve no purpose.”

Staff and volunteers at Samaritan also emphasized that proximity was a practical matter, as many of their clients walked to the agency. During my volunteer shifts I would often see clients pile groceries from the food pantry into baby strollers or abandoned grocery carts to carry them home. For clients, having a nearby source of help was important. One African American woman, a retired teacher who has lived in the local community for 42 years, explained to me that the neighborhood’s recently improved public transit infrastructure “only goes downtown” rather than places she needs to go. While Samaritan leaders did not keep detailed records of clients, the executive director estimated that nearly 100 percent of service recipients lived within a half-mile of the center.

Despite often discussing the importance of proximity, Samaritan staff saw themselves as serving a people, rather than a geographic area. Staff and volunteers constructed notions of “the community” based on perceptions of the problems facing a specific demographic group: low-income Hispanic residents. As one 22-year-old white, male intern explained, “a lot of the community around here is just poor Hispanics and so that allows us to reach out to the needy.” Samaritan’s organizational niche of serving Hispanic residents was often reinforced through origin stories, or accounts of why the agency was founded. These stories were not simply recollections of the past, but they also served to legitimize present-day organizational practices. Origin stories at Samaritan often emphasized two interconnected realities: that the agency was founded in an “inner city” neighborhood and that it was founded to serve the Hispanic community. One African American staff member noted that the founder, a white woman, “had a love for the community, Hispanic preferably” (emphasis added).
Ethnicity was not just connected to material need, but also to the immorality endemic to the inner city. This was especially true for white staff members and volunteers, who often identified immorality as a major issue in the community. In one conversation with Samaritan’s volunteer coordinator, a white woman, she discussed the founder’s vision for the geographic location of the agency by noting that,

*She was really courageous coming—a single, Anglo woman, coming into this environment. With the, you know: your men worked hard. They partied hard. There was alcoholism, a lot of prostitution and gangs and whatnot. That’s why (Samaritan) was here.*

In this statement we see the connections among ethnicity, morality, and gender in the organization’s origin story. As told by the staff member, the organization’s founder (a white woman) “courageously” established the organization in a needy (Hispanic) and immoral (inner city) community.

*Proximity to Whom?*

Staff and volunteers at HC also emphasized the importance of proximity. But it was not necessarily proximity to clients that was important, but rather proximity to a nearby volunteer and donor base. Indeed, HC saw itself as serving a set of zip codes (a place), rather than a specific demographic community (a people). To an outside observer, HC might seem to be an enigma because of its identity as a social service agency in a wealthy community. Rather than empty lots or dilapidated homes, visitors to HC find a backdrop of office buildings and high-rise apartments. Such units were not easily affordable; the median monthly cost of a renter-occupied housing unit in the agency’s zip code is $1408, nearly $500 more than the city-wide average (US Census Bureau 2015). Even the executive director described their location as “counterintuitive.”
Nonetheless, interview respondents from HC highlighted multiple benefits of their location. In her version of the agency’s origin story, one white female staff member indicated “I think it felt natural to be in close proximity to one of our biggest and our founding member churches at that time, because you know, they were... trying to figure out how this is going to go and who will serve and how do we get resources.” It is notable in her statement that the primary concern of the founders was who will serve rather than who will be served. The organization’s location did prove to help HC secure financial resources from nearby, affluent churches. Indeed, proximity to church partners was the most commonly cited rationale for the agency’s location, but it was primarily framed as an economic, rather than spiritual, benefit.

Although HC staff and volunteers saw their location as having clear benefits, they did not deny the challenges faced by clients who utilized their services. These problems were exacerbated by the recent discontinuation of a nearby bus route frequently used by clients. One white female staff member acknowledged these challenges in reflecting:

*So, we have heard a lot of feedback about how difficult it is now because the closest bus stop... is several blocks of walking. So, if you think about, you know, someone--especially a single client who has no help why they are here--leaving with a minimum 2 bags... to carry all of that on the bus is just tough.*

I heard similar stories from many volunteers, as the challenges faced by clients were an issue of ongoing concern. “Obviously the main card, so to say, is the client accessibility,” HC’s executive director told me, “because if clients aren’t accessing it, it doesn’t matter whether volunteers will or not.”

**Different Communities, Similar Demographics**

Given these constraints, is HC actually serving “the needy”? Unlike Samaritan, HC keeps detailed records of its clients and thus I was able to look at the demographics of help-seekers from the last six months of my observations. HC’s clients during this time were predominantly
women (58 percent) and non-white (90 percent). In fact, just over 50 percent of visitors to HC were Hispanic and more than 35 percent were black or African American. Only 0.6 percent of all clients, however, came from the zip code where HC is located.

(Insert Table 1 About Here)

When looking at the “community” that HC serves, however, it is remarkably similar socio-demographically to the community served by Samaritan (see Table 2). In calculating the weighted average of HC’s 29 zip codes based on number of visitors, I found that the “average” HC client comes from a zip code with a poverty rate of 27.42 percent and a median income of $46,041. In other words, people from poor, non-white communities were often coming to HC despite geographic distance and transportation barriers. Aside from safety, HC staff and volunteers offered several explanations for this trend. Some pointed to the fact that they were able to offer many services in one place, while others suggested that clients prefer coming to Christian agencies like HC, which can be more compassionate than other service providers.15 While the organization’s Christian identity was perceived as a potential draw for clients, it was rarely identified as a relevant consideration in the organization’s decision of where to locate.

*Using Space to Recruit*

Despite being in very different neighborhoods, HC and Samaritan serve demographically comparable populations. Yet, the symmetries between these two agencies go further, as both organizations utilized similar methods to make sense of their geographic location. The significance of each agency’s location was not simply about accessibility for service recipients, but also the organization’s ability to attract important constituent groups. Understandings of place were leveraged by both agencies to serve donors and volunteers, which they saw as one facet of the “business” of social service provision.
Leveraging safety. At HC, agency leaders leveraged their geographic location to construct a safe space for visitors, as a key attraction for potential volunteers was the safety of the surrounding community. For example, according to one long-time female volunteer: 16 “our volunteers feel safe coming there and our clients do too.” Other interview respondents at HC also cited safety as a benefit for clients, as the community where HC is located was perceived to be safer than the communities where most clients lived. Some staff members went so far as suggesting that recruiting volunteers to work in a low-income community would be difficult. 17

The volunteer experience was particularly important because “donor” and “volunteer” were overlapping identities. Towards the end of my fieldwork at HC, I received a letter soliciting donations for the agency’s capital campaign. Aside from outlining the money needed to fund construction of a new facility (at the current geographic location), the letter also publicized the agency’s goal of having 100 percent of volunteers contribute financially to the project. This desire to recruit volunteers as donors informed evaluations of HC’s physical location, as the executive director 18 noted that one factor in the agency’s decision to stay in their current location resulted from “looking at our volunteer work base and wanting it also to be convenient.”

Leveraging the “inner city.” Leaders at Samaritan also considered donors and volunteers in leveraging the significance of their geographic location. Despite constructing an organizational identity based on proximity to the poor, many Samaritan staff saw living outside the neighborhood as a necessity. When asked about why he lives in an affluent suburb rather than close to Samaritan’s main location, the executive director, 19 a 61-year-old white man, explained,

I know it hinders me, but in my position as the executive director, it’s not that bad of a hindrance, because a lot of our networks of support are in areas just like where (my wife and I) live. So, to me there’s some advantage to being out there... I’m like a dad that
Like a working father who must provide for his children, the director suggested that agency
leaders like him must broker connections that bring resources into the neighborhood so that
Samaritan staff members can adequately do their jobs. Almost every staff member and volunteer
I spoke with at Samaritan lived outside of the neighborhood. Therefore, like members of HC,
Samaritan staff prioritized proximity to donors, albeit on an individual rather than organizational
level.

Samaritan leaders also highlighted the agency’s location in a “rough” neighborhood to
recruit volunteers. The organization relied heavily on a summer intern program and short-term
service groups from churches to maintain operations. These time-limited experiences were often
marketed as a chance to do hands-on ministry in the “inner city,” which proved to be a strong
motivator for many white volunteers—especially those from rural backgrounds—who saw the
urban setting as the frontlines of Christian ministry to the poor. These short-term volunteers
often valorized their experience by describing the local culture of poverty in hyperbolic terms.
One white volunteer,\(^{20}\) for example, explained to me that, “almost every house (in the
neighborhood) is going to have some form of drug use or some form of illegal activity going on.”
Such views of place were often strategically utilized to recruit predominantly white volunteer
groups from wealthier neighborhoods. When reflecting on how the local community was
described during volunteer orientation, one white intern\(^ {21} \) reflected, “I think we just say this is a
not safe area, a poor area, and a Hispanic area. And that is about all that is said. And so, that is
kind of grouped into one big, cohesive thing, like those things just come together.”

*Using Space to Deter*
While the agencies labeled space as “safe” or “rough” to recruit donors and volunteers, they also utilized space in ways that deterred certain populations from visiting the agency. Deterrence was not an explicit aim of either organization, but each agency made spatial decisions based on racialized conceptions of who is deserving of aid, and subsequently, who is undeserving. The parallel ways that both organizations utilized space—to attract key stakeholders and deter the undeserving—led them to serve similar populations, despite being in dissimilar neighborhoods.

Boundaries of “the community.” Although Samaritan leaders focused on serving Hispanic families, not all clients who visited the agency were Hispanic. Based on my observations over 12 months, I would estimate that one-third of visitors to Samaritan were African American. In many ways this might be expected; the agency is less than a mile from the border of a historically African American neighborhood with a poverty rate of 37.9 percent (US Census Bureau 2015). Yet, in discussions of “the community,” workers at Samaritan rarely mentioned black clients. I asked one staff member—an African American woman22—about this, and she explained,

_We serve the Hispanic community more so. . . for instance, we went to the Hispanic chamber of commerce. . . I wouldn’t go to the African American chamber of commerce, because their needs are different from Hispanic needs._

Despite being located nearby geographically, African American clients were not seen as part of the “community” because they had “different needs.” This view resulted from a view of space where geographic proximity was primarily understood as proximity to a single ethnic community, rather than the totality of residents in a physical space.

And Samaritan’s commitment to the Hispanic community resulted partly from the perception that Hispanic clients exemplified the “working poor.” Some staff members made this
connection quite explicitly. In one conversation with the executive director about the development of a second Samaritan location in the city, he explained,

That area, the general area, is more blue-collar. Its 70% Mexican, 20% El Salvador, and 10% other Hispanics... And it is, we call it the “working poor”... they work, but it’s not quite enough to make it. And so that is why we can help them and it’s a lot of folks in that community, great community of people.

The goal of serving Hispanics is construed—at least in part—as a result of seeing this ethnic group as “blue-collar” and “working poor.” In the director’s mind, this is the reason “why” the agency can help them.

The meanings attached to ethnic communities also surfaced in discussions about the possibility of the agency moving. At Samaritan, gentrification and the threat of the displacement of their core client-base presented a unique challenge. Given the people-centric spatial logic of their work, would the agency move if the “community” left the neighborhood? The answer, for many I spoke with, was yes. In explaining how the organization would approach moving out of the neighborhood, a member of Samaritan’s board of directors explained,

Samaritan is setup right to help poor Hispanic families. It does that extremely well... I think there’s a ten-year horizon at the maximum for the critical mass (of gentrification) being achieved. What happens after then? I don’t know. I think that rather than Samaritan changing what they do to serve new people, I think they should keep doing what they do and go find the people they serve best.

Plans to “go find the people they serve best” were already in motion at the end of my fieldwork. In my last meeting with the director he explained that the organization had decided to target their Hurricane Harvey relief efforts in a non-adjacent Hispanic community. When asked why they did not select an adjacent and highly disadvantaged black community, the director explained that the agency was not “experienced in serving the black population.”
**Spatial vetting.** HC also leveraged space to deter certain types of clients, particularly those who might try to take advantage of the agency’s services. The fact that HC is distant from poor communities and public transit stops allowed the organization to practice a form of spatial vetting that discourages people who might not actually “need” services from visiting the agency. While this could be labeled as a latent benefit of the organization’s physical location, some workers drew on this advantage of place more explicitly. Once, after completing an interview with a woman who had failed to bring the necessary paperwork on a previous visit, one white female volunteer told me, “You know, (the client) came back, so that is a sign that she really needs our services.” In this volunteer’s mind, the fact that the client “came back” to HC despite living in a distant community proved that she needed help. Other volunteers suggested that HC’s geographic isolation from poor neighborhoods also deterred people who might disrupt the safe space they had constructed. One African American volunteer suggested that the agency’s location “probably dis-encourages some undesirable people… People who want to go around and run off stores, and businesses and stuff. . . because they aren’t going to go where they going to be seen by the police.” At HC space was utilized not only as a vetting mechanism but also as a means of cultivating safety, namely by deterring “undesirable people” from visiting the agency.

**DISCUSSION**

While policy debates about how to best connect the needy with resources have brought increased scholarly attention to how social service organizations serve disadvantaged communities (Allard and Small 2013; Levine 2016), recent research highlights the reality that service providers are often not located in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Allard 2009; Anderson 2017; Garrow and Garrow 2014; Marwell and Gullickson 2013). The present study builds on such research by providing insight about how social service agencies conceptualize and use place
in their work. Based on a study of two faith-based social service providers in Houston, Texas, I find that organizations construct a spatial logic for their work not only based on their proximity to the populations they serve, but also based on relationships with key stakeholders within their organizational field, including donors and volunteers (Wooten and Hoffman 2016). This logic subsequently patterns how organizations “use space” (Gotham and Brumley 2003) to attract certain populations and deter others.

In particular, I highlight the rhetorical difference between the logics utilized by two social service providers and argue that such differences have been consequential for the ways that each organization has responded to demographic changes in nearby neighborhoods. Staff and volunteers at Samaritan Ministries, which is in a high poverty neighborhood, articulate an understanding of place that leverages proximity to a socially constructed community to recruit donors and volunteers to help the “working poor” of the inner city. In such a conception, a group of people is the primary spatial consideration for service provision, and thus place is incidental. Rather than a geographical area, staff and volunteers at Samaritan envision themselves as serving an ethnic group—poor Hispanic families—plagued by various forms of immorality seen as endemic to urban life. Highlighting a brown rather than black “culture of poverty” (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010) in the neighborhood helps Samaritan leaders to recruit short-term volunteer groups as well as donors in their home communities, which are often located in wealthier areas of the city. The agency’s proximity to their target community of need has also guided their ongoing response to the threat of gentrification, as their espoused spatial logic has led them to seek out opportunities in other Hispanic neighborhoods rather than nearby, highly disadvantaged black communities.
Conversely, members of Hope Charities, a service provider in a community with a low poverty rate, articulate an understanding of space that prioritizes service to a set of zip codes, rather than a particular demographic group. In such a conception, the primary spatial consideration is place, and thus the people in that place are incidental. The organization’s location in a wealthy, predominantly white community is leveraged to create a safe space that attracts a proximate donor and volunteer base. Following the work of scholars like Kissane (2010) and Lee (2017), leaders at HC define “accessibility” as different than proximity, as the cultivation of a safe space was conceptualized as an important benefit for service recipients. Geographic isolation also serves as a vetting mechanism that helps discourage dependence on their services.

The results presented here problematize the work of authors like Garrow and Hasenfeld (2012a), who infer that “location decisions” are one-time occurrences based primarily on moral frames. While some Samaritan staff and volunteers saw their proximity to the poor as motivated by religious teachings, members of HC never justified their distance from poor communities using religious logic. Further, despite their religious identities, neither organization drew explicitly upon moral or religious frames in their use of space. Rather, conceptions of space were leveraged to attract key stakeholders and deter undeserving populations, goals that each agency identified as part of the “business” of social service provision. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on organizational fields, which emphasizes how organizational decisions are shaped by relationships with key stakeholders (Bartley 2007; Wooten and Hoffman 2016).

Additionally, the oft-used conception of a “location decision” (e.g., Allard 2009) fails to acknowledge how organizations – as fields of stakeholders—might continually renegotiate understandings of place over time in relation to these different stakeholders. The reality that one
organization plans to stay in their current location (HC) while another anticipates moving (Samaritan) illustrates that spatial meanings are continually “negotiated, defined, and produced through social interaction, social conflict, and struggles between different groups” within highly unequal and racially segregated urban areas (Gotham 2003: 723). The displacement of Samaritan’s target community for service, which has led them to seek out opportunities in other needy Hispanic neighborhoods, suggests that organizations make many “location decisions” over time. These decisions are often legitimated through origin stories, which are a primary means by which organizational actors make sense of the agency’s geographic location.

The findings also extend prior work on the geography of the contemporary social safety net (Joassart-Marcelli and Wolch 2003; Marwell and Gullickson 2013; Peck 2007), specifically by highlighting the spatial logics utilized by service agencies. In particular, this study highlights the perceived benefits for organizations working in wealthy communities. Proximity to donors, a nearby volunteer base, and safety were all cited by members of HC as advantages of their geographic location. Safety was also perceived as a benefit for clients. This perception is supported by the work of authors like Kissane (2010), who finds that disadvantaged populations often avoid visiting service providers in neighborhoods perceived as dangerous. Yet, Kissane also emphasizes the importance of proximity for clients, which helps underscore another benefit of HC’s geographic isolation: spatial vetting. Members of HC occasionally conceptualized space as a vetting mechanism that discouraged “undesirable” populations from visiting the organization.

Despite working in demographically dissimilar neighborhoods, I find that both HC and Samaritan leverage space to accomplish similar goals. The parallel ways that both organizations use space—to attract and deter—might be one reason why HC and Samaritan serve similar
populations. Indeed, one key finding from this study is that organizations in wealthy communities do not necessarily serve demonstrably different populations than those located in poor communities. One explanation might be that poor, non-white populations prefer visiting FBOs (Reingold et al. 2007) or value the safety and anonymity of receiving services outside their neighborhood (Kissane 2010). Regardless, it is almost certainly a symptom of a privatized and geographically mismatched safety net, which often requires needy populations to visit multiple agencies to meet their material needs.

The present study also adds to recent research on the role of organizations in urban communities (Levine 2016; Marwell 2004), by demonstrating how space is utilized to perpetuate or alleviate inequality not just through large-scale housing relocation and investment programs but in daily service provision by human service organizations. My findings problematize policies designed to move resources into poor neighborhoods (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2000), by demonstrating how moving resources away from poor communities can be one strategic means by which organizations seek to accomplish goals like reducing dependence on assistance (Danziger 2010). This study also demonstrates that agencies that do seek to bring resources into poor neighborhoods face notable obstacles (see Walker and McCarthy 2010). For example, leaders at Samaritan Ministries often intentionally lived outside the neighborhood to foster relationships with donors.

Further, prior research highlighting the preponderance or dearth of organizational resources in certain communities (Graddy and Ye 2006; Small and McDermott 2006; Small et al. 2008) often fails to acknowledge the ways that “neighborhoods” are socially constructed in the work of organizations. The case of Samaritan ministries, an organization that focuses specifically on “poor Hispanics,” illustrates this fact. This suggests that neighborhood organizations might
only be attuned to the needs of—and serve as advocates for—certain community members (Allard and Small 2013; Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012).

Drawing on work on organizational fields, the present study also contributes to work on faith-based poverty alleviation efforts. First, I find that FBOs (like Samaritan) do draw on religious motivations to locate themselves in poor communities. This provides one potential explanation for the overrepresentation of FBOs in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Botchwey 2007; Graddy and Ye 2006). The findings also suggest that there can be considerable heterogeneity among faith-based nonprofits in the spatial logics they employ (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013), as well as the way they navigate competing logics (Reay and Hinings 2009).

Finally, given the dearth of organizational resources in predominantly black communities (Anderson 2017; Lee 2017), this study highlights how spatial vetting processes might disproportionately task African Americans with proving they are deserving of help by navigating geographic space to visit social service providers in other communities. While ample research highlights how conceptions of deservingness (DeSante 2013) and disparities in access (Joassart-Marcelli and Giordano 2006) are patterned by race, the present study provides evidence of how the two are connected in the work of social service agencies. Future research should explore how organizations that are in predominantly black communities make decisions about who to serve, and who not to serve.
REFERENCES


Table 1. Service Area Demographic Compositions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Samaritan Ministries</th>
<th>Hope Charities</th>
<th>Hope Charities</th>
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<td><strong>Location</strong></td>
<td>Physical Location/</td>
<td>Physical Location</td>
<td>Service Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poverty Rate in Zip Code</strong></td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Median Income in Zip Code</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Black or African American in Zip Code</strong></td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hispanic or Latino in Zip Code</strong></td>
<td>63.9%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates
Note: HC service area calculated by weighting demographic composition of each zip code served by the agency by the proportion of unique service recipients from that zip code over a 6-month period.
1 In total, I conducted 155 hours of participant observation across both agencies. I also spent another 20 hours observing other sites to ensure the typicality and validity of my two cases.
4 Kentwood is a pseudonym for a well-known, wealthy neighborhood in Houston.
6 Samaritan Observation, conducted July 13, 2018.
7 Samaritan Observation, conducted March 29, 2018.
12 HC Int02. White Female, Manager. Conducted January 22, 2018.
13 HC Int02. White Female, Manager. Conducted January 22, 2018.
15 HC Int08. White, Female, Volunteer. Conducted April 9, 2018.
19 Samaritan Int05. White Male, Executive Director. Conducted September 13, 2017.
26 HC Observation, conducted November 6, 2017.