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Subject to Evaluation: How Parents Assess and Mobilize Information from Social Networks in School Choice[1]

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A rich literature examines how information spreads through social networks to influence life opportunities. However, receiving information does not guarantee its use in decision making. This article analyzes information evaluation as a fundamental component of social network mobilization. The case of school choice, where the value of information may be more uncertain, brings this evaluative dimension to the forefront. Interviews with 55 parents in Boston show how parents selecting schools assess their social network ties as information sources, privileging information from those they perceive to have affinity and authority. These evaluative criteria map onto disparate networks to engender unequal mobilization of this information. The findings illuminate mechanisms sustaining inequality in social network mobilization and reorient scholars to consider processes underlying information use alongside information diffusion to attain a more complete understanding of how network resources are mobilized in action.

KEYWORDS: choice; decision making; education; evaluation; inequality; school choice; social class; social networks.

INTRODUCTION

When people weigh consequential decisions or life changes, social networks often provide information about options and opportunities. Such information does not flow automatically; individuals differentially and selectively receive information and support from their social connections (Perry and Pescosolido 2015; Smith 2007; Wellman and Wortley 1990). Beyond receiving information, individuals also assess the information their connections provide and consider whether to act upon it. This evaluation process constitutes a critical yet typically overlooked stage of social network mobilization.

The case of school choice—an increasingly common approach giving families the responsibility to learn about and select schools—brings this evaluative dimension to the forefront. Parents decide whether to request or use information from social networks and which network ties to rely on. Though social networks are a common information source for parents choosing schools, parents differ in the extent to which they use such information (Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan 2007). We know little about how parents interpret what they may hear from others and how this may relate to differences in their social networks.

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This study analyzes how parents evaluate their social network ties as sources of information about schools and how their networks facilitate or constrain information use. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 55 parents choosing schools in Boston, I find that parents evaluated social ties with school information by looking for signals of affinity and authority. Given the composition of their social networks, working-class and poor parents (predominantly parents of color) often had few or no ties whose information they deemed acceptable, even if they knew many others with school-age children, leading many to discard or decline to request information about schools. For middle-class (predominantly white) parents, such ties were abundant, such that receiving overlapping information from multiple sources facilitated use of this information in school selections. These findings show how evaluation underlies social network mobilization and—mapped onto stratified, segregated social networks—produces inequalities in the use of information from social networks.

SOCIAL NETWORK MOBILIZATION

Information about housing, employment, education, and other opportunities often flows through social contacts (Galotti and Mark 1994; Granovetter 1973; Rossi 1980). Utilizing information from social networks involves both access, via a connection to a person with information, as well as mobilization, conceptualized as activation of this connection in purposive action (Lin 2001). Studies of access, analyzing network structure, reveal stratification in the composition of social networks, with nonwhites and those of lower socioeconomic status less connected to high-status professionals (Campbell, Marsden, and Hurlbert 1986; Cornwell and Cornwell 2008; Lin and Dumin 1986). Network mobilization, too, varies across individuals and social contexts. For example, while most low-income African Americans interviewed by Sandra Smith (2007) welcomed information from personal contacts in the job search, one-quarter were reluctant to do so. Smith traces this variation to factors at multiple levels, from the job seeker's reputation to institutional features of the labor market (see also Sharone 2014). Mobilization also varies based on attributes of the individual's social network. For example, network structure, including demographic composition and the extent to which ties are connected to one another, conditions the informal support individuals receive (Hurlbert, Haines, and Beggs 2000). In networks that routinely exchange information, individuals may learn about opportunities without actively requesting them (Lin 2000; Morales 2016).

This research advances our understanding of variation in information *receipt*, but leaves unexamined the *evaluation* of such information facilitating or constraining its use. In the job search, the empirical context typically studied, information is presumed a valuable end in itself; in other contexts, such as school choice, this may not be the case. As rational job seekers would act upon information received (i.e., apply for the job), simply hearing about a job opening is considered "successful" mobilization. Yet even if individuals receive information from social networks, they must decide whether to accept and use it. If they do not deem information

sufficiently valuable, they may disregard it or decline to request it in the first place. Thus, mobilization—using information in action (Lin 2001)—may fail not only when those with information do not share it (Marin 2012; Smith 2007), but also when recipients discard it. Relatedly, beyond fears of "losing face" (Smith 2007) or perceptions that providing information will be burdensome to social ties (Sharone 2014), individuals may not request information because they do not anticipate using information potentially shared.

Research in other areas examines factors shaping selective activation of network ties. Communications and marketing research finds a sense of shared interests and mind-sets drives more positive evaluations of information, which then increases the likelihood of acting on it (Ayeh, Au, and Law 2013; Gilly et al. 1998; Wang et al. 2008). This perceived value alignment appears at least as important as similarity on demographic characteristics. Additionally, research on social support finds that when discussing important topics, people often turn to those they perceive as most knowledgeable, sometimes signaled by one's professional role. For example, people are particularly likely to talk to health professionals when discussing health (Perry and Pescosolido 2010; Small 2013). This study builds on these insights to examine the evaluation of social networks as information sources in the school choice context and the selective, differential mobilization of this information that ensues.

Studying information diffusion in the job search context also obscures the role of repeated, reinforcing information. Granovetter's (1973) seminal study highlighted the utility of "weak ties" to spread information about employment opportunities. However, job information may operate as a "simple contagion," in which "contact with a single source is sufficient for the target to become informed" (Centola and Macy 2007:706). Once a contact shares a tip about an open position, the job seeker knows about the vacancy and can act accordingly. "Complex contagion" situations, however, "require social affirmation or reinforcement from multiple sources" (Centola and Macy 2007:707). While Centola and Macy focus on information transmission, I suggest that information *use* in complex contagions may differ from that in simple contagions. For example, hearing about a particular school from multiple contacts may make mobilizing this information in decision making more likely than hearing the same information from a single contact.

Furthermore, while scholars have devoted considerable attention to how differential social networks engender inequality in information access and receipt, we know little about implications for inequality in information *use*. Social networks differentially include ties who have or share information; they may also differentially include ties whose information individuals judge as acceptable and ultimately utilize in action. Examining how individuals assess network ties as potential information sources can thus provide insight into how inequality in social networks becomes inequality in the mobilization of networks in action.

PARENTAL SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SCHOOL CHOICE

To examine evaluation in social network mobilization, I draw on a case that brings evaluation into sharp relief: parents selecting schools. School choice policies

break the link between residence and school assignment, charging families with gathering information to choose among educational options. Parents often define school quality subjectively rather than based on objective metrics like test scores (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010; Kimelberg 2014; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014). Like other information reflecting personal experiences or opinions, then, individuals receiving information about schools cannot be certain of its value. Parents must determine which, if any, connections have information that will benefit their families.[3]

Research has come to a consensus that social networks are a common source of information in school choice. Qualitative studies find reliance on information from social networks "common among parents from all backgrounds" (Weininger 2014:276; see also Ball and Vincent 1998; Bell 2009; Lareau 2014). For example, working-class and poor parents "consult[] friends or relatives" about schools and "[take] quite seriously the recommendations or warnings provided by these informants" (Neild 2005:282, 284; see also Pattillo, Delale-O'Connor, and Butts 2014; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014). Middle- and upper-middle-class parents express a similar reliance on social networks for information to help them select among schools (Altenhofen, Berends, and White 2016; Holme 2002; Kimelberg and Billingham 2013; Lareau, Evans, and Yee 2016).

However, this research also offers evidence of parents as discerning at times. Despite the pervasiveness of information from social networks among UK parents choosing schools, Ball and Vincent (1998:383) note that some doubted or rejected this information, supplementing it with other sources or "rely[ing] on their own or their child's affective responses instead." African American, mostly low-income parents in Chicago turned to relatives, friends, and neighbors for information but did not unilaterally accept it; they "weighed, evaluated, and critiqued information and its sources" (Pattillo et al. 2014:250). Similarly, the affluent, mostly white parents Holme (2002:189) interviewed "did not rely on information from just anyone" but "relied primarily on the opinions of other high-status individuals." Thus, when selecting schools, parents do not take into consideration all information they receive or have the opportunity to receive from social networks. We know little about how parents evaluate their social networks as possible information sources and why they accept or reject information.

Survey research also shows that social network reliance is not universal. Among school choice participants in Denver, approximately 30% considered other parents the most useful information source, similar to the proportion that deemed an enrollment guide and school personnel most useful (Yettick 2016; see also Teske et al. 2007). In a survey of parents in Milwaukee, Washington, DC, and Denver who considered non-neighborhood schools, approximately two-thirds (68%) reported receiving, though not necessarily acting upon, information about schools from family and/or friends; 58% said they gathered information from parents and students (Teske et al. 2006, 2007). While most parents said they would believe other parents with children in the school over school officials if their information

[3] Thus, while I draw on Lin's (2001) conception of social capital, I do not conceptualize this information as social capital. As Lareau et al. (2016) show, secondhand information about schools is not necessarily a valuable resource and may even lead parents astray.

conflicted, one-third said they would trust the school officials' information more (Teske et al. 2007). Furthermore, the survey found stratification in social network acceptance and use. White parents were more likely than black and Hispanic parents to talk to other parents, talk to family and friends, talk to more people, and trust information from other parents; higher-income and more highly educated parents also turned to and trusted networks more for information to help them select schools, compared with lower-income and less-educated parents, respectively (Teske et al. 2006, 2007).

Why might advantaged parents more often use social networks in school choice? One possibility involves generalized trust, which varies by race and class; disadvantaged groups are less trusting (Smith 2010) and thus may be more wary of information from others broadly. Low-income mothers, for example, express distrust across multiple settings, from work to childcare, and this often extends to social networks as well (Levine 2013). Another line of research suggests that social network non-use stems from a lack of access: working-class, poor, and/or nonwhite parents may not have social connections to others with information about schools. Compared with middle-class parents, working-class and poor parents have few ties to parents of their children's classmates (Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). Drawing on these insights, this study examines a complementary explanation for differences in social network mobilization. Specifically, I analyze the role of information evaluation, considering whether and how networks are structured in ways that provide unequal access to ties with information parents perceive as valuable.

RESEARCH SETTING

I draw on the case of school choice in Boston Public Schools (BPS). Boston is an ideal case to understand how people think about their social networks as information sources because all families select and rank schools as part of the school registration process. In this compulsory choice approach, all families become "choosers" asked to gather information about schools to weigh their options.

Drawing national attention for its conflicts over desegregation, Boston has a contentious history of school assignment. In *Morgan v. Hennigan* (1974:482), a federal judge ruled that "the entire school system of Boston is unconstitutionally segregated" and ordered the city to desegregate its schools. Court-mandated busing across predominantly white and black neighborhoods led to protests and violence. BPS continued to modify its school assignment policies in the following decades, ultimately removing race as a factor in assignment. In 2014, BPS revamped its school choice policy to offer each family a customized list of schools to choose from based on home address, aiming to provide access to high-quality options while assigning students closer to home (BPS 2013).

BPS holds information sessions in neighborhoods across the city, puts up billboards, and partners with community organizations to inform families about registration, which begins in January. Parents can view and rank their customized list of schools beforehand online. Under the 2014 plan, the list includes all schools within one mile of the home and additional schools as necessary to ensure a minimum

number of schools with higher standardized test scores. Families have an average of 8 to 14 schools to choose from and can rank as many as they like (BPS 2013). Information provided with the list of schools includes each school's address, distance from the home, whether BPS provides bus transportation, school hours, and the school's standardized test quartile compared with others in the district. Families can access other information, such as after-school programs, school size, and school uniform policy, online. BPS also organizes opportunities for families to visit schools before registration. After each registration round, a lottery determines school assignment based on parents' selections (BPS 2013).

In contrast to contexts where school choice is opt-in or where students are assigned to zoned neighborhood schools, the district asks all families to make choices. BPS families have no default choice or guaranteed seat in a neighborhood school. The district invites families to research schools to make informed selections, while granting them wide latitude in doing so: they can draw upon extensive information or none at all, information from any number of sources or none at all. The Boston context provides an opportunity to examine how parents navigate a process that, while ostensibly the same, can take vastly different forms.

DATA AND METHODS

To examine how parents interpret and utilize information from social networks when selecting schools, I draw on in-depth interviews with 55 heads of household who registered children for BPS for the 2014–2015 school year: 48 mothers, 3 grandmothers, and 4 fathers (3 of whom were single fathers). In spring 2014, shortly after registration began, I recruited 34 respondents who registered children for kindergarten (either the traditional five-year-old kindergarten or BPS's four-year-old prekindergarten), via paper and e-mail flyers, encounters in the community, and snowball sampling. To maximize variation in experiences, I recruited an additional 21 respondents who registered in summer 2014, via a survey distributed to parents at registration; 10 of these registered a child for kindergarten.[4] While this approach cannot speak to whether parents use social networks to select schools or the characteristics of parents who do so, it is well suited to analyzing inductively how parents in a variety of situations understood the role of their social networks in school choice.

These recruitment methods yielded a group of respondents diverse in several ways, as shown in Table I. They lived in neighborhoods across the city, representing 19 different zip codes that collectively make up 82% of the city's population. There was a wide range in annual household income, with a median of $30,000. I divide respondents into three social class groups: middle-class, working-class, and poor. Middle-class respondents were predominantly white and Asian (13 of 16), while working-class and poor respondents were predominantly black, Hispanic, or multiracial/another race (31 of 39).

Almost all interviews took place within a few months of school registration and selection. Interviews were conducted in English, usually in respondents' homes, and typically lasted 60–90 minutes. I also conducted brief follow-up phone

[4] All respondents quoted registered a child for kindergarten unless otherwise noted.

Table I. Respondent Characteristics, by Social Class

	Middle Class (N = 16)	Working Class (N = 20)	Poor (N = 19)	Total (N = 55)
Race/ethnicity				
Black	2	8	10	20 (36%)
White	11	3	3	17 (31%)
Hispanic	0	3	1	4 (7%)
Asian	2	1	1	4 (7%)
Multiracial/Other	1	5	4	10 (18%)
Foreign-born	1	6	4	11 (20%)
Highest level of education				
High school diploma/GED or less	0	9	8	17 (31%)
Some college	0	4	9	13 (24%)
Associate's degree/tech. certificate	0	6	2	8 (15%)
Bachelor's degree	5	1	0	6 (11%)
Graduate degree	11	0	0	11 (20%)
Annual household income				
<$20,000	2	3	16	21 (38%)
$20,000–$60,000	1	14	3	18 (33%)
$60,000–$100,000	5	3	0	8 (15%)
>$100,000	8	0	0	8 (15%)

Note: To determine social class, I slightly modified criteria outlined by Lareau (2003). Middle-class families had at least one parent with an advanced degree or a job involving "substantial managerial authority or... centrally draw[ing] upon highly complex, educationally certified... skills" (e.g., doctor, nonprofit administrator); the two low-income middle-class parents included a mother with an MD and MPH previously in medical research but searching for work and a stay-at-home mother married to an MBA student who previously led a software design company. Working-class families had at least one parent employed in a non-middle-class job (e.g., home health aide, office assistant). In poor families, no parent was formally employed, with income coming from disability benefits or public assistance.

interviews with 30 of the 34 spring-recruited respondents approximately a year after the first interview, gathering their reflections on school choice one year later. Interviews covered respondents' households, neighborhoods, and social networks; how they learned about school registration and schools; experience registering; criteria for evaluating and ranking schools; whom they trusted for school information; and organizational involvement. I do not quantify respondents' networks, but rather analyze respondents' subjective understandings and assessments of their networks.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. I read each transcript several times and coded in multiple rounds: first using an open coding approach and then focusing specifically on respondents' social networks, using codes and themes identified in open coding. As analysis occurred concurrently with data collection, I probed these topics more deeply in subsequent interviews. I organized information in matrices to capture data on emergent themes (Miles and Huberman 1994). I examined the extent to which each respondent fit with my argument, and iteratively refined the argument as I read and reread each transcript. I do not judge the value of information respondents might have received from social networks or whether using information from social networks would have led respondents to select higher-quality schools, however defined. Rather, how respondents themselves assess this information—how they construct its value or lack thereof—is the focus of this analysis.

FINDINGS

Selecting schools based on information from social networks is common but not universal (Ball and Vincent 1998; Teske et al. 2007). While limited access to ties with school information did prevent a few parents from turning to social networks, I found considerable variation in network mobilization even among parents who knew others with experience in nearby public schools. Parents assessed their networks to decide whether they could provide useful information and which ties could do so.

To trace parents' evaluation and mobilization of social network information, I first discuss how parents evaluated individual network ties as potential information sources about schools, showing how parents across class and race conceptualized valuable information sources as those with whom they felt affinity regarding childrearing and education, as well as those they believed had authority with respect to educational matters. Second, I consider how these evaluative criteria applied to parents' actual networks. I examine how and why social network ties with affinity and authority were more common among the middle-class parents I interviewed, compared with working-class and poor parents. Finally, I show how, through these unequal networks, information from social ties became differentially mobilized in school selection. If disadvantaged parents are less likely to draw on information from social networks (Teske et al. 2007), my findings suggest that higher levels of generalized distrust or a lack of ties to other parents broadly are insufficient explanations. Rather, compared with their middle-class peers, working-class and poor parents may have networks with few ties whom they evaluate as useful sources of school information, inhibiting mobilization.

Evaluating Network Ties as Information Sources: Signals of Affinity and Authority

How do people evaluate those in their network as potential information sources? Parents choosing schools saw information as more valuable when it came from those with whom they feel *affinity* and those perceived as having *authority*. Though anyone with experience in local public schools might have useful information in theory, parents distinguished among those in their networks. Affinity in this case refers to perceived similar approaches to education and childrearing, which suggested to parents that others' perspectives on schools could serve as a proxy for what they would experience. Authority denotes expertise on schools and education as defined by parents, indicating that the person's information could assist in selecting high-quality schools. To evaluate information sources, parents drew on signals of affinity and authority: a commitment to education, children's outcomes, and related professional experience. Often, these were discussed simultaneously in parents' comments about their social networks.

Prioritizing Education Parents looked to their social ties' commitment to and involvement in their children's schooling as a way to evaluate whether these ties had useful information. Prioritizing education suggested both affinity, as parents perceived themselves as similarly focused on education, and authority, indicating good

decision making with respect to schools. For example, Alisha, a middle-class black mother, said she trusted her "like-minded friends" for school information:

> I trust my friends who are in the education world or a similar world where they're going to really make the best decisions for their children. They're involved parents. If they tell me, well, this is a phenomenal school, I've had a really great experience here, the curriculum is outstanding, I will trust that versus my sister, who... makes decisions based on what's easy for her and not what's best for the children. Sometimes, my husband and I made decisions based on what is best for our children and not what's easy for us.

Alisha evaluated her social ties based on their alignment with her own priorities and decision-making processes. In addition, she felt that friends with similar approaches to education would "make the best decisions for their children," imbuing them with expertise in educational decision making that she believed her sister lacked.

Similarly, Lacey, a working-class black, white, and Native American mother, described a friend she trusted for school information, citing their shared approach to parent involvement: "Mainly, it's not up to the school.... You have to teach them at home too. That's how [this friend is] too; that's how I am also." Lacey described her friend:

> She's very educational driven, wants the best education-wise for her son. I think right now he's actually going to be in Boston Latin [the city's most prestigious exam school], but since he was three, she always put education first so I know she wanted the best for him. She pulled him out of different schools to explore her options of what schools are better for him. So she knows some of the schools, good and bad.

Lacey trusted this friend's judgment and experiential knowledge about schools because her information on the "good and bad" about schools stemmed from a focus on what would be best for her child. The friend's commitment to education signaled authority in this realm.

Conversely, parents were skeptical of information from those they felt had different priorities. Tana, a working-class Native American mother selecting a high school for her son, recalled parents from his sports team whose varying levels of participation and engagement she had observed. While she trusted some of them for school information, she described one parent who "really didn't focus on what [her son] did," contrasting this parent's lax approach to uniforms with her own strict adherence to the policy. This difference informed Tana's understanding of the usefulness of the information the parent could provide. "When you see that certain parents don't really care, why would I listen to what they tell me, 'cause it's not about the kids to them." Julie, a middle-class white mother, said she would not trust school information "if it seemed like someone wasn't actually that interested in education... that, I would be kinda concerned about." Parents seeking to evaluate their network ties as information sources about schools looked to others' commitment to education as a signal of affinity and authority.

Children's Outcomes Parents also looked to their peers' children to assess the information these ties could provide. When others' children had positive academic outcomes, this aligned with parents' hopes for their own children, suggesting affinity, and indicated that these ties had the knowledge and skills to make good educational

decisions, suggesting authority. Kara, a middle-class white mother, described parents with older children whom she trusted for school information, saying, "Seeing these kids are nice, well-adjusted smart kids and they're being successful in the public schools was really key." When Kara was deciding which schools to rank, she considered her other children's academic performance: "It's really looking at, so my friends, how are they doing? What are their results in terms of getting into some of the exam schools?... [It] says a lot to me that they're happy with their choices." In another example, Angel, a working-class black mother, signed up for a program enabling Boston students to enroll in suburban schools because she had "heard so many good things" from friends and family. This information resonated with her as "it show[ed]... through the kids" and their advanced academic skills. Parents hoped to emulate ties whose children were doing well and welcomed the information these ties shared.

On the other hand, parents hesitated to accept information from those whose children they saw as less impressive. Megan, a middle-class white mother, said she trusted secondhand information "with a filter," explaining that "everyone has their different experiences, their expectations." Megan continued:

> For example, somebody was talking about a school and was like, "My [pre-K student] now knows how to write and spell his eight-letter name." My filter was like, "Why didn't your kid already know how to do that before [pre-K]? Was he not in school, or were you not working on letters with him?"

For Megan, children with different skills suggested parents with other childrearing practices, underscoring her lack of affinity with them. Similarly, Saraya, a poor Nigerian immigrant, said she did not talk about schools with those she knew from church because she noticed their children "are not really good in academics." Saraya said that her six-year-old could read and write, while a nine-year-old in another family she knew could not. Sopheary, a poor Cambodian immigrant selecting elementary schools for her two children, mentioned a friend she knew with experience with the public schools: "I don't ask her really much advice from her," because "her daughter, she's kind of wild. I think she get kick out of schools, suspension, things like that.... That's obviously not the school bad. It's her is bad." Network ties' children's negative outcomes called into question these ties' priorities and decision making, indicating both a lack of affinity with parents and a lack of authoritative knowledge about education.

Relevant Professional Experience While the two signals previously discussed—educational priorities and children's outcomes—reinforced parents' perceived or aspirational similarities with their network ties, a third distinguished many parents from their ties. Parents identified personal ties with professional roles in education or related fields as valuable information sources; to parents, those in such positions had the knowledge, contacts, and experience to help them select the best schools. Although I do not assess whether parents actually received higher-quality information, however defined, from these ties, parents perceived that they had more authoritative and thus more valuable information.

Parents who noted relevant professional roles as an evaluation criterion felt this indicated insider knowledge. For example, Anh, a working-class Vietnamese

immigrant, had many relatives in the area with school-age children, but turned to her brother-in-law, a social worker, for school recommendations because, though he did not have children in public school, "he helps a lot of people with children." Isabela, a working-class Brazilian immigrant, asked the coordinator of a playgroup organized by BPS for information "because they are connected with [BPS], so they will know more than I would about schools.... The information would be more accurate." For Isabela, the coordinator's professional association with the school system indicated authority.

Parents wary of the information a particular source could provide sometimes cited this source's distance from professional expertise in and connections to education, as when Malia, a poor black and Native American mother, explained that she would not turn to her mother for school information because "she... doesn't work in anything in the school system." Echoing Lareau (2003), some working-class and poor parents compared those they knew with educational professionals who, in their view, had the "right" information and were "more qualified."

While middle-class parents may be less deferential to the expertise of educational professionals than working-class and poor parents, some middle-class parents also recognized social ties with relevant professional experience as more authoritative information sources, suggesting these ties provided access to expert knowledge that they lacked. Recall Alisha, who turned to friends "in the education world," particularly one who worked in BPS's kindergarten transition division. Sally, a middle-class white mother selecting a high school for her son was already a BPS insider as an elementary school teacher in the district, but said, "I had to call someone I know who's more familiar with the high schools." Sally reached out to a contact from her graduate program for recommendations "because she's like an administrator in [this department]—she works with people at all different high schools." Recognizing her lack of expertise regarding high schools, Sally sought more specialized information.

Faith, another middle-class white mother, described how she distinguished among friends who offered information about schools:

> I trusted [one friend's] opinion [on a school] because she works in education and she has an early childhood education advanced degree, and she teaches ESL in the Boston Public Schools. And my other friend who recommended [another school] is an attorney, so I feel like she doesn't have as much expertise to offer in matters of school. We also had a neighbor who taught at [another school] and I valued her feedback a lot in the process as well. Prioritizing the feedback of folks who are actually in the industry is a useful thing to do.

Faith differentiated among her multiple highly educated ties, privileging information from those ties she perceived to have expertise about education based on their professional training and roles. When social ties were "in the industry," this signaled authority to parents, who embraced the information these ties provided.

Disparate Networks

Across class and race, parents used signals of affinity and authority to evaluate the information their social connections could provide. Yet network ties with these characteristics—as interpreted by parents—were not distributed evenly among those

I interviewed, with middle-class parents more commonly identifying valuable information sources in their networks than working-class and poor parents. This aligns with survey research finding that white parents, more highly educated parents, and higher-income parents have larger education discussion networks than nonwhite, less educated, and lower-income parents, respectively (Schneider et al. 1997). Although the present study cannot establish differences across groups, my analysis—consistent with other research—shows how segregated, unequal social environments may structure the extent to which individuals have ties they perceive as valuable information sources.

Regarding perceptions of affinity, working-class and poor respondents often highlighted differences between themselves and their network ties, particularly with respect to education. Lupe, a working-class Salvadoran immigrant, described strong, positive social connections in the community, many of whom had young children—"I like to talk too much, that's why." Yet she distinguished herself from these friends when it came to schools, saying, "Everything is different from me to the other mothers that I have known." Lupe added, "They only care that [the children] go to school," noting that a close friend had not "got inside the school with the teachers." She trusted "nobody" for information about schools: "You have to see from your own eyes.... I will think different from what they think of schools." Even though Lupe turned to her network for support in other areas, the differences she perceived with respect to education precluded her from taking their advice regarding schools. This aligns with research finding that "symbolic boundaries... help marginalized populations to justify their situations in order to create and maintain self-respect" (Sherman 2013:414).

Meanwhile, middle-class parents turn to peers to define school status and reputation (Holme 2002), emphasizing their affinity with other parents, especially regarding schools. Liz, a middle-class white mother, exemplified this, noting that she and her friends had similar values and parenting styles: "I think we've sort of self-selected to not hang out with folks who are drastically different." Middle-class respondents more often mentioned others whose experiences they hoped to emulate. Meanwhile, working-class and poor respondents more typically reflected on friends' children in situations they hoped to avoid. These patterns reflect the intersection of homophilous social networks with persistent educational inequality in which advantaged families are more likely connected to others whose children perform well in school.

Social class may also shape the education-related expertise parents attach to their social networks. Given class-differentiated social networks (Cornwell and Cornwell 2008; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001), working-class and poor parents are more likely to lack social connections to the educational professionals they perceive to have valuable information (Horvat et al. 2003). Working-class and poor respondents who knew higher-status professionals in education or related fields personally often trusted their advice, as noted above, but few had such connections. While some knew working-class employees in related areas, they generally requested only logistical information from these connections. For example, Danielle, a working-class black mother, previously worked security at the school bus yard and called a friend who still worked there. "I asked her like... do they have buses available for the kindergarten students? She was letting me know like, yeah they have buses, you know?"

Tiffany, another working-class black mother, mentioned a friend who worked as a school secretary. I asked what this friend told her: "Nothing much besides make sure you register your kid.... She gave me the [district] phone number if I needed further questions." While this is important information, it did not help parents learn about whether schools met their standards for quality.

Even beyond their personal connections to teachers and other related professionals, middle-class respondents often felt confident in their peers' knowledge about school options. Although there is nothing inherent about one's educational background or financial resources indicating knowledge about local public schools, middle-class parents referenced these characteristics to justify their confidence in the information their network ties could provide. Jessica, a middle-class white mother, said she relied on information from parents from one of the city's most affluent neighborhoods, reasoning that "these people that live where they live could afford to send their kids to a very expensive private school" and yet had chosen a particular public school instead. Middle-class parents had affluent, privileged peers whom they saw as authorities with respect to school information.

Furthermore, race and class intersect in ways that shape social networks. In my sample, race and class overlapped considerably, limiting my ability to examine these intersections in depth, but the data are consistent with other research suggesting that, compared to white parents, black parents (and perhaps other nonwhite parents as well) may more often lack access to network ties they see as valuable information sources. Middle-class blacks are likely to be connected with, and live in proximity to, poor blacks from whom they may wish to distance themselves (Pattillo 1999). Indeed, the two middle-class black respondents described more class-diverse ties and lived in higher-poverty neighborhoods than their middle-class white counterparts. For example, Alisha's neighborhood was over 20% poor, and she described close relationships with both school district administrators and welfare recipients.

Low-income whites, meanwhile, tend to live in more advantaged neighborhoods than nonwhites of similar economic status (Logan 2011) and to have social networks that can help them get ahead (Cornwell and Cornwell 2008; Royster 2003). This seemed to be the case for most, though not all, of the working-class and poor white respondents in the sample. In addition to her childhood friends, for example, working-class white mother Sandra had befriended other mothers through her daughter's dance class who owned homes in what she called "a really nice area" of the city. Rodney, a poor white father, had friends from Little League and his childhood neighborhood who worked for the city fire department, police department, and emergency medical services. Nevertheless, these networks did not necessarily translate to trust on matters related to school selection. Sandra said she made decisions herself, adding she could not trust others and did not know the dance class mothers well; Rodney said he would turn to school registration staff for advice on schools, saying, "I don't really know where my friends' kids go to school and stuff like that." As the next section discusses, network formation patterns and organizational ties fostered networks that facilitated—or inhibited—the mobilization of information from others.

Unequal Mobilization: School Information as a "Complex Contagion"

Parents assessed signals of affinity and authority to identify *individual* ties with useful information about schools. I find that those who relied strongly on information from those they knew—21 of the 55 respondents—had a rich *network* of ties they deemed valuable information sources. As abundant trusted ties facilitated information use, I suggest that school choice information operates as a "complex contagion" (Centola and Macy 2007:707) in which information from a single tie is often insufficient for action; rather, complex contagions "require exposure to multiple sources of activation."

Across race and class, parents spontaneously discussed the risk in relying on a single person's advice. As Lindsay, a poor white mother, explained, "Something that works for one child may not work for another child." Liz, a middle-class white mother, felt it was "important to hear from everyone's perspective because every child is different," so "if it's just one [person saying something], it's very personal." When parents declined to act upon information from social networks, they were not necessarily closing the door to advice, but rather, suggesting that they did not have enough concurring opinions. Nadia, a poor white mother, said that parents at her daughter's Head Start exchanged information. While this did not affect her school selection, she noted that her decision would "just depend[] on how many negative reviews and what the negative review was that would make me decide, 'No, I'm not gonna go with that school.'"

Overlapping affirmations suggested multiple children having similar experiences in a school, framing information as representing shared understandings rather than individual idiosyncrasies. Middle-class Asian mother Bree described how she felt more comfortable acting upon overlapping advice:

> You want more than one person's view. . . . You want different perspectives before you make a decision. . . . I had a tendency to go to the [online] forum because there are a lot of parents; they seem to be very candid about their opinion.[5] I feel like I would more than likely get more than one viewpoint, which is nice. You can't just rely on one person.

Similarly, when Kamiah, a poor black mother, received information from a friend about preschool availability, she verified it with district staff: "That's just how I am. I get a second opinion on a lot of things, so I don't just go by one person." On childrearing advice, working-class Brazilian immigrant Isabela said:

> Coming to America, I learned to listen to whatever you tell me, but don't accept it until I have a second or third, sometimes a fourth opinion that goes exactly like you say or similar to what you say before I buy in with what you were trying to tell me.

Such parents described a high bar for accepting and using information.

Among the parents I interviewed, using information from social networks to select schools varied by social class, with middle-class respondents more likely to draw on information from networks than working-class and poor respondents.[6]

[5] This "forum," one of several neighborhood-specific online message boards and e-mail lists respondents mentioned, is described on its website as "an online extension of a face-to-face community of parents" in Bree's neighborhood. Respondents described seamlessly transitioning between in-person and online contacts with other parents in the groups.

[6] Among middle-class respondents, social network information played a primary role in school selection for 13 and a minimal role for 3; among working-class and poor respondents, such information played a primary role for 8, a minimal role for 10, and no role at all for 21.

For middle-class respondents, typically situated in networks that could provide overlapping information from multiple others, specific schools developed reputations they perceived as legitimate and thus actionable. Even if they took information from some people with "a grain of salt," in the words of several parents, they still had a plethora of ties whose input they respected.

Working-class or poor respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to have few or no trusted ties. Without a critical mass of concurring sources, they more often eschewed feedback from others. Some relied on other research, sometimes via in-person visits but often online using Google—"Google's my best friend," said Anna, a working-class black mother, a sentiment echoed by many others. This typically led them to school websites.[7] These parents felt their online research helped them get a better understanding of the school's offerings and environment. For example, Candice, a working-class black mother, wanted a school with a reputation for safety. Asked how she learned about that, she did not describe asking others she knew, but explained, "I actually went online. You can go online and Google the school. Put in the name and everything about that will come down.... There was a pedophile that had worked there. Got caught. Yeah. It was on the news." Several others who declined information from their networks said they decided based on "gut instinct" or their own "hunches," noting that they could transfer schools if they did not like the assigned school. Gabby, a poor black and Hispanic mother, explained why she selected a school she had heard was bad:

> Everybody's different toward everybody, and I can't just judge by what other people tell me.... I can't necessarily just judge it and say, that's what they're gonna do with my kid. I can't say that. It's always, like I said, the first try for everything. If something goes wrong while he's there, I will transfer him.

This approach enabled parents to select schools they did not know much about, reasoning that in a context of uncertainty, they could reoptimize later through the transfer process.

When working-class and poor parents heard similar information about a school from multiple sources, however, they tended to act on it. For example, Charity, a working-class black mother, wanted her daughter to attend a particular school since she had heard positive things from many other parents: "So many people say that [it's] a good school." Ismelda, a working-class Dominican immigrant, did not want her son to go to school in certain neighborhoods where she had overheard negative things from others in the beauty salon where she worked. Meanwhile, many other customers spoke positively about the schools in her neighborhood. Ismelda said she trusted what she heard "because that's not only one. It's a lot of people talk. When a lot of people talk, it's different."

Nevertheless, examples like this were the exception in my study; more often, working-class and poor parents did not receive the overlapping information they might have used to inform their choices. I suggest two, often intertwined, processes through which middle-class parents cultivated social networks poised to spread the

[7] Middle-class parents turned to these sources as well, though tended to discount them, seeing them as biased. Across class and race, some respondents prioritized school test scores when evaluating schools while others disregarded them.

"complex contagion" of school information: how parents developed their networks and how organizations supported these networks. Together, these processes situated middle-class parents in networks that routinely shared information about schools even if recipients did not actively or intentionally seek out this information, increasing the likelihood these parents would hear multiple concurring opinions.

Network Formation Higher rates of geographic mobility separate the elite from families of origin and childhood friends (Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak 2011), perhaps providing opportunity and motivation to form new ties as they reach childbearing age and thus build networks oriented around their children. Among interview respondents, most working-class and poor parents (26 of 39) grew up in Boston, while few middle-class parents (2 of 16) had childhood roots in the city. Those who had lived in Boston for decades had typically formed friendship networks before they had children, as opposed to forging ties based on shared parenthood status.

Middle-class respondents repeatedly spoke about meeting other parents in child-centered pursuits, such as at playgroups, in childcare, through neighborhood mothers' groups, and on the playground. "All of my friends in [my neighborhood] have been since having kids," said Caroline, a middle-class white mother. Caroline felt that class resources supported friendships centered on children's activities:

> In [this neighborhood] we're all kinda in the same boat. None of us are living in poverty. There's no projects [here], you know. There's a lot of things we don't have to worry about, like where's our next meal going to come from. So we're all able to focus more on our kids and, oh, we really want them to learn to swim this summer so we'll sign them up for swim lessons.

Networks like Caroline's created ties to many other, similarly situated parents that provided multiple, reinforcing perspectives about school options.[8] Caroline said her top choice was "easy," because it had "gotten so many great reviews. . . . I knew a lot of families who went there."

As in other research (Horvat et al. 2003), working-class and poor respondents' social networks typically consisted of childhood friends and kin. These network ties sometimes had information about schools but rarely provided parents with consistent, overlapping information. When asked if she knew other parents, Rashida, a working-class black and Hispanic mother, replied, "Tremendously, yeah," from growing up in Boston. Although Rashida's friends had children of all different ages, these friendships were not centered on their shared parenthood status: "When I see my friends, it's our time—we don't really discuss the children." Earlier, she had spoken hypothetically about how she would interpret information about a school:

> If I'm hearing from four or five different people, oh my son's doing horrible, oh my child's doing horrible in this school, they don't get the work, they're falling behind—four or five different people is not just going to make that up. I'm not going to go just based off one person, but to hear that is gonna make me doubt, OK, I'll still check it out, but I hardly doubt he'll go there.

[8] While parents may have cultivated these networks because they already valued input from peers, parents often described these connections emerging in routine activities. Social networks themselves may also shift perceptions of the value of these networks for information. For example, when parents' social contexts change, so too can their school preferences and childrearing beliefs (Daniel 2015; Darrah and DeLuca 2014).

For Rashida, hearing redundant information would encourage action based on this information in a way that hearing the same information from a single person might not. Given her network of childhood friends, however, Rashida did not receive the multiple recommendations that she might have deemed actionable.

Exceptions to the overall patterns show how social network use related to parents' networks rather than social class itself. For example, Lily, a middle-class Asian mother, said she made friends in Boston before having children, through a queer Asian group, through her and her ex-partner's workplaces, and through recovery groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Like Rashida, Lily said she rarely talked about schools with her "core group" of friends: "We've talked a little bit, but we're not talking to share information—we're just telling them... our experience." Lily listened to advice from a colleague of her ex-partner but, in contrast to many other middle-class respondents, said, "We were mostly making decisions ourselves, just from our own research." Without a large personal network oriented around parenting and children, Lily only minimally drew on her network for information about schools.

Organizational Ties Organizations, which can foster affinity and forge connections with many others in similar situations, also differentially structure social networks by social class. While childcare centers provide opportunities to meet other parents (Small 2009), poor parents and less-educated parents are less likely to utilize formal childcare (Mulligan et al. 2005). In Boston, local mothers' groups that helped mothers build networks with other mothers of young children predominantly consisted of affluent white mothers, according to respondents (see also Kimelberg 2014). These organizational connections were forged through race- and class-specific resources, activities, and self-presentation. For example, middle-class white mother Kara described her neighborhood mothers' association, which convened a monthly group for new mothers: "You're pregnant, walking down the street and everyone's like, 'Are you a member of the [mothers' association]?'" Others said they heard of these groups through their real estate agents. Meanwhile, Cici, a poor immigrant from Trinidad, lived in a public housing complex a few blocks away from Kara. She said that even though she knew many others with children in public school, "I don't take information from people," as "their lifestyle not my lifestyle.... They're not involved enough with their kids." At the end of the interview, I asked about the mothers' group. Cici said she had seen the group at a neighborhood parade but had not heard anything else in the two years she had lived there. When asked if she would be interested in joining, she replied, "If I could get involved in something, yeah! I would love to. But lack of information, we don't know nothing." While others in this organization said they were trying to get the word out to lower-income families, their largely race- and class-segregated networks and activities made it difficult to reach out meaningfully.

Similar organizations convening working-class and poor parents did not necessarily connect parents to those they trusted for school information. Like many middle-class respondents, Isabela, a working-class Brazilian immigrant, joined organizations upon moving to Boston to develop networks in her new city. Isabela participated in organized playgroups and e-mail listservs in her working-class,

immigrant neighborhood. She made friends who had young children but did not feel these friends could help her select schools: "I don't really have anybody that I can ask information [about schools] because they don't know either. They don't speak English. They haven't been here for that long." Isabela's personal network, relatively homogenous in class, ethnicity, and neighborhood residence, did not provide the "bridging" ties that she felt could provide useful information to help her family get ahead (Briggs 1998).

However, organizations did sometimes encourage regular exchanges among working-class and poor parents (Mazelis 2017; Small 2009) that extended to school information parents trusted. Fatima, a poor Somali immigrant, said she knew about 10 other families from Head Start and the mosque with same-aged children. They exchanged information regularly: "We meet every day for pickup, drop-off; we see each other. Now when we see each other, we always tell what's going on [with school registration]." Such information included "how do we know which schools are good, why we would pick them." Fatima emphasized the value of information from networks in making her decision: "The parent experience, parent to parent, it does matter."

Ultimately, middle-class parents—and, likely, middle-class white parents in particular—are well positioned to have abundant connections whom they trust as information sources and whose concurring advice they act upon when selecting schools. Working-class and poor parents without this kind of social network may draw on information from specific selected ties or may eschew the limited advice they receive. While parents may draw on similar criteria to evaluate their network ties as information sources, their vastly different social networks mean that some parents feel confident capitalizing on what their connections know, while others are isolated from those they might trust to help them make better decisions.

From Unequal Mobilization to Unequal Choices?

Working-class and poor parents and parents of color often face considerable constraints in selecting high-performing schools (DeLuca and Rosenblatt 2010; Pattillo et al. 2014; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014). To what extent does unequal network mobilization contribute to school choice inequality? In this study, working-class and poor respondents who relied on information from social networks more heavily were slightly more likely to rank schools in the top quartile of district standardized test scores (called Tier 1) first and slightly more likely to rank either a Tier 1 or 2 school first. (Notably, however, regardless of the extent to which parents used network information, and across race and class, the vast majority of parents who recalled their school rankings selected at least one school in Tier 1 or 2.)

What working-class and poor respondents gained from mobilizing network information varied. Sometimes, this information led them to higher-performing schools; other times, it did not. For example, Melissa, a poor black mother, ranked three schools. One, in Tier 2, her friend's daughter had attended. "She said she really likes it. . . . She said the teachers are really nice there." Melissa felt comforted

that her daughter would know someone else in the school. This school was also closest to Melissa's home, so in the absence of additional information it might have been her default. However, another school Melissa selected, recalling a cousin who graduated from that school and spoke highly of it, was in Tier 4, the bottom quartile. In another example, Evelina, a poor black mother, selected a Tier 2 school first and a Tier 4 school second, in both cases informed by what others had told her. She had heard good things about the Tier 2 school from a district principal she knew, trusting this information "because, I mean, she's an educator.... She's part of the system. She should know." The Tier 4 school was her second choice, after a former coworker told her the school had improved a lot. Evelina explained, "It's not just any parent.... I know what type of person she is.... We kinda have the same expectations."

Thus, it is not clear whether using network information helps parents select higher-performing schools. Survey research on this question is inconclusive (Lay 2016; Yettick 2016). Parents who reject network information may be correctly recognizing that information from others will not help them select a school aligned with their preferences and may even be detrimental to this goal. Importantly, however, network mobilization patterns may perpetuate school segregation if not inequality in the test score performance of chosen schools. In this study, as in other research (Holme 2002; Kimelberg and Billingham 2013), affluent white parents repeatedly mentioned the same few schools—not necessarily those with the highest test scores (Kimelberg 2014) but those of which their peers spoke highly. Kimelberg and Billingham (2013:223), studying middle-class parents in Boston similar to those I interviewed, argue that these parents' "clustering behavior may contribute to increasing levels of segregation across schools in the district," as middle-class white parents increasingly converge upon a small number of schools.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study highlights the role of evaluation in the process of utilizing information from social networks in action. Similar evaluative criteria map onto disparate social networks to sustain inequality in network mobilization, through processes such as network segregation, boundary work, network formation patterns, and organizational resources. In this way, unequal social network structures not only differentially create opportunities to receive information but also to deploy it in action. Even with more "objective" information, such as job leads, evaluation may play an important role. For example, a friend may know of a job opening, but one may not think to ask if this friend is unemployed and thus disregarded as knowledgeable about jobs.

Nevertheless, the case of school choice differs from the job search in ways that may heighten the role of evaluation. For example, in compulsory school choice contexts, parents cannot simultaneously act on competing information; in the end, they must submit a single ranking of schools. Accepting information that turns out to be inaccurate thus carries considerable risks, so individuals may question the information they receive and wait to hear multiple concurring opinions before acting on it.

In the job search, however, as when parents can apply widely to charter schools or other school options, one can pursue multiple options, so accepting incorrect information does not necessarily hinder one's opportunities. In such instances, ties that can provide new information simply create more opportunities to draw upon (Granovetter 1973).

Other contexts of *choice*—as opposed to search—may present conditions similar to the Boston school choice case, and research should consider these contexts to better understand network mobilization. For example, individuals choosing among job offers, students selecting a college to attend or a major once in college, and families deciding which neighborhood to live in represent critical stratification processes in which people have the opportunity to turn to networks for information to guide their decisions. People may weigh input from others such as which companies have friendly workplace climates, which majors' graduates do best in the labor market, or which neighborhoods have a reputation for safety. We know information from networks matters in these choices (Lareau 2014) but need to learn more about how individuals interpret, filter, and use information from these networks in decision making.

This study also extends our understanding of information use in school choice, illuminating mechanisms underlying differences in social network use across groups (Teske et al. 2006, 2007). The Boston case provides an opportunity to examine evaluation of information from social networks among a range of parents asked to gather information and select schools. Public school districts across the country are increasingly expanding school choice for families, for example, offering open enrollment and enrollment streamlined with charter schools. Future research should study social network use in other school choice contexts. Additional research is also needed to understand the perspectives of groups underrepresented in my sample, such as middle-class blacks, working-class and poor whites, and parents who do not speak English, to consider whether and how these findings apply more broadly.

The findings suggest that access to information will not shift decision making unless individuals accept and decide to act upon it. Working-class and poor parents are not necessarily broadly distrustful; they may be willing to act on information from someone they perceive to have affinity or authority. Thus, efforts to increase network mobilization should not only connect parents to one another but also nurture shared goals and confidence in one another's knowledge. For example, childcare centers attentive to their role in cultivating parents' networks can increase parents' connections and trust in one another (Sommer et al. 2017). Early childhood interventions such as home visiting often work with parents individually but might consider components that support parents in providing one another with mutual assistance. Facilitating more inclusive and diverse gatherings of parents in playgroups and parenting groups is also critical to foster "bridging ties." As these findings on school choice show, effectively promoting social network mobilization will involve cultivating connections to others whom individuals consider valuable information sources.

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