

Talk on the Playground: The Neighborhood Context of School Choice

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Despite consensus that neighborhoods influence children's outcomes, we know less about the mechanisms that cause neighborhood inequality and produce those outcomes. Existing research overlooks how social networks develop among people at similar points in the life course through repeated interactions in neighborhoods. Existing studies do not illuminate the ways in which these geographically based networks can influence life-altering decisions. In this article, we use qualitative interviews with White, middle-class parents in gentrifying neighborhoods in a large Northeastern city to examine how parents decided where to send their children to kindergarten. Parents reported relying heavily on information that they received from their network of other neighborhood parents whom they had befriended on the playground or at daycare in the course of their daily child-rearing routines. The daily routines of child rearing led to rich and important social networks. But tensions also emerged among parents as they made different decisions about where to send their children to kindergarten. By focusing on how life course stages affect how people use space and interact in neighborhood spaces, we can better understand how neighborhood spaces shape the decision-making process of school choice.

INTRODUCTION

Urban sociologists have long argued that neighborhoods influence children's lives because they shape opportunities those children can access. Growing up in privileged neighborhoods leads to more earnings and higher social status in adulthood (Chetty et al. 2016). Inversely, growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods leads to lower levels of economic and social mobility (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Sharkey 2013). Urban sociologists also highlight the idea that segregation by race and class limits access to information that promotes mobility (Krysan and Bader 2009; Shroder 2003). Thus, unequal access to knowledge in parent decision-making could perpetuate other forms of inequality.

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Yet, empirical evidence has not demonstrated how neighborhood contexts influence the transmission of information that parents use to make decisions. One reason is that studies typically examine *either* the daily interactions among residents in neighborhoods *or* the life course factors that influence child-rearing decisions. The two approaches build on two different conceptions of time. The study of daily interactions focuses on patterns of living that occur in short intervals. Daily living lends itself to repetition and thus social scientists come to understand social relationships not only through the occurrence of social interactions but also through their recurrence (Duneier 1999; Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Studies of the life course, however, observe occurrences that cannot recur. Decisions made at life course transitions carry greater weight for both individuals and social structure because they are irreversible (Giddens 1984).

By partitioning urban phenomena into these separate scales of time, urban research misses how space forces these two scales to interact in ways that shape how families navigate life transitions in neighborhoods. Studying daily routines and life course decisions separately causes urban researchers to potentially overlook the factors that bring people together in space. We argue that social networks emerge from life stage-specific routine interactions in neighborhoods and that those networks become conduits through which neighbors gather information to make life-altering decisions.

We study school choice decisions because they offer a useful case to understand how neighborhood spaces influence consequential decisions. In theory, school choice policies should reduce the correlation between the organizational inequality of schools and the geographic inequality of neighborhoods since school choice policies allow parents to send their children to schools other than the ones to which they are geographically assigned. The utilitarian framework of rational action assumed in such policies ignores the potential *social* mechanisms that would affect parents' behaviors (Gross 2009), in particular the manner in which the social context of neighborhoods affects behavior (Pred 1977; Sampson 2012). If social interactions among homophilous residents influence school choice, such interactions would limit how much school inequality can be decoupled from geographic inequality.

To understand the manner in which neighborhood contexts could influence the major life course decision of school choice, we draw on in-depth interviews with parents in 34 White middle- and upper-middle-class families with a child between the ages of three and six who lived in gentrified or gentrifying central city neighborhoods. As the parents faced their children's transitions into schools, the school (organizational) context did not align with their expectations. The importance that parents placed on the decision and the urgency with which parents needed to decide where to send their kids to school make this an ideal case for understanding the role of neighborhood spaces in consequential life decisions.

By focusing our study on White middle- and upper-middle-class families, we examine the role that neighborhood spaces play in the decision-making process of privileged urban residents that can explain how educational opportunities accrue to that privileged group. These families have access to extensive information networks, they can move in or out of the city as they choose, and many can afford to send their children to private schools. While a broader discussion of the power dynamics and inequality of gentrification is beyond the scope of this paper, these are factors that must be considered when studying how shared spaces can affect decision making.

Parents reported that neighborhood social networks were influential in their decision-making process, including how they formed the set of schools in which they would consider enrolling their child. The entry of their children into kindergarten reflected a life-stage transition for parents who had, only a few years earlier, made decisions about where to live without considering schools. As they transitioned to the life stage of being parents of school-aged children, they were surprised by the lack of school options they considered to be viable. Parents in our study reported that the dominant way that they learned about their options was through social networks that they had developed at local parks, daycares, and other neighborhood settings. Parents conveyed that social networks emerged through the repertoires of middle-class childrearing that brought them into regular contact with one another. Parents spoke about how their cohort of parents collectively experienced this life-stage transition and placed a great deal of meaning in these local networks. Strong disagreements and tension developed as parents discussed schools, and the intensity of these tensions indicated the strength of the social ties among parents. The tension also revealed the agency these middle-class White parents used to solve the “problem” of school choice even as their collective choices reproduced existing inequality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

GENTRIFYING URBAN SPACES AND DECISION-MAKING

Urban sociology approaches topics such as decision-making in two ways. One approach considers the influence of the *life course*, such as how people make decisions about when and where to move. Moves reflect choices that families make based on preferences weighted by factors related to school, housing, and employment (Clark and Flowerdew 1982; Marsh and Gibb 2011; Phipps and Meyer 1985). The relative importance of factors changes based on priorities households have at different points in the life course. Consequently, life course transitions (e.g., marriage, divorce, employment) predict moves between neighborhoods (Rossi 1955). A second approach argues that *daily interactions* among residents affect how people make decisions. This line of work argues that social life emerges from residents’ daily interactions (e.g., Anderson 1999; Duneier 1999; Kusenbach 2003). Interaction in neighborhood spaces fosters familiarity that allows residents to form friendships, mutually support one another, and collectively address community problems.

Life course approaches have been used in the study of gentrification to illuminate motivations of those who move into and out of gentrifying neighborhoods. Gentrifiers point to “livability” of neighborhoods as a key factor for moving into central city neighborhoods, though that livability depends on their employment and family situation (Florida 2002; Ley 1980; Zukin 1987). Many gentrifiers work in high-end service professions or the arts and do not have children. Evidence suggests that the transition into parenthood, and especially the transition of a child into school, precipitates moves out of gentrifying neighborhoods and into the suburbs (Butler and Robson 2003). Gentrifiers tend to be highly educated and want similar educational advantages for their children and fear the irreversible damage that attending less prestigious schools will do to their children’s life chances. Butler and Robson (2003) find that the poor reputation of schools in gentrifying neighborhoods leads parents to believe their children will not enjoy the same

educational advantages they had enjoyed. This fear often leads young parents to leave the neighborhood.

Other studies apply a daily interactions approach to show how neighborhoods become sites in which residents negotiate norms and values. These negotiations are often exacerbated into conflict due to the rapid neighborhood changes that come about during gentrification. Authors have focused on conflicts that cross class and racial lines. Tach (2009) describes the policing of poor tenants in units renovated as part of a HOPE VI development. Hyra (2014) shows how the daily lives of incumbent residents changed after they were “displaced” from a park because it was converted to a dog park by incoming residents, a finding similar to Pattillo’s (2007) over tensions caused by grilling and street life. Less attention has been focused, however, on the manner in which residents of the same class or racial group negotiate these changes among themselves. This gap in the literature leaves room to examine the ways in which the class and racial context of gentrification affects the internal dynamics of same-class or same-race communities (Bridge 2001).

As our study follows White middle-class families with access to information and resources who decided to move to gentrifying neighborhoods and had a broad range of options of where to send their children to school, the case of school choice can help unpack the geographic character of the social networks upon which parents rely when making life-course decisions.¹

SCHOOL CHOICE AS A SOCIAL PROCESS

School choice presents a theoretically rich case to examine the role of space on decisions because schools are both physical entities and cultural institutions that provide access to human and cultural capital (Lareau and Goyette 2014; Posey-Maddox et al. 2016). The decision about where to send one’s child to school also represents an “irreversible” decision that affects the child’s life course (Giddens 1984). The added dimension of rapid neighborhood demographic change that outpaces organizational change in urban public school bureaucracies makes the study of school choice in gentrifying neighborhoods even more theoretically rich. Although changes associated with gentrification offer the *potential* of increasing resources and reducing disparities associated with racial segregation and economic segregation (Freeman 2006; Massey 2002), actual school choices can limit how much of that potential is realized. In addition, school choice might exacerbate gentrification by separating school contexts from neighborhoods (Billings et al. 2017; Pearman and Swain 2017).

School choice programs were designed, in part, to alleviate neighborhood inequality by decoupling school attendance boundaries from neighborhoods. Some advocates of school choice programs presume that the programs will allow parents to find the best options for their children even if those schools are not the traditional, geographically assigned public school (Berends et al. 2009). However, some researchers argue that accessing “good” schools is a difficult process that tends to work for the benefit of the most advantaged families (André-Béchely 2013). Parents worry about where to send their children to school, especially status-conscious middle-class parents who feel anxiety about choosing a school that will set their children on course to produce secure economic futures (Ball 2003b).

Under federal law, states are required to report test scores and passage rates for publicly funded schools that are intended to help parents make informed decisions. However, research on school choice shows that parents rely heavily on social networks to decide where to send their children to school. Middle class parents can be suspicious of official information, which can seem promotional (Ball 2003a). Parents supplement, or even supplant, the official statistics reported by schools with knowledge acquired through the “grapevine” of social networks (Ball and Vincent 1998; Bell 2006, 2007; Cooper 2007; Holme 2002; Neild 2005). Affluent parents talk more about schools and tend to rely more on social networks than less affluent ones in the hope that they will find the best opportunities for their children (Crozier et al. 2008; Schneider et al. 1997; Van Zanten 2003). More educated and higher-earning parents are also less likely to seek guidance from relatives (Schneider et al. 1997).

Using a daily interactions approach, researchers have identified ways in which neighborhoods foster social support that influences school choices. Bell (2007) has shown that local networks provide instrumental support that allows parents to expand the set of schools they could consider. For example, mothers decided where to send their children to school based on whether they could rely on each other to help with daily routines such as carpooling. The instrumental benefits of reducing commuting time also factored into where parents moved and enrolled their children in school (Karsten 2007), a finding that echoes Rose’s (1984) admonition to consider how city neighborhoods provide spaces that support typically gendered reproductive social functions.

THE PLAYGROUND AT THE INTERSECTION OF DAILY ROUTINES AND LIFE COURSE DECISIONS

While urban sociology has tended to focus either on daily interaction or life course decisions, we argue that meaningful social interaction occurs at the intersection of the two different scales of time and that the intersection shapes decisions. The daily routines that lead neighbors to interact are particular to stages in the life course. For parents with young children, this means taking them to parks, birthday parties, and other activities associated with middle-class practices of childrearing (Lareau 2011; Mose 2016). Geographically embedded social networks arise from these repeated and routine interactions with others at similar stages in the life course, and these networks become key resources upon which parents rely when faced with consequential decisions as they transition from one life stage to the next.

Existing research on social capital provides support for this possibility. In studying how people create social capital, Small (2009) argues that organizations like daycares mediate relationships among parents by creating conditions where parents regularly interact with one another. But unmediated routine interaction within informal settings like playgrounds could also create social capital among people with similar routines. Geographers have shown the significance of playgrounds in the lives of families with young children as a site for social interaction among parents (Bennet et al. 2012; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Kusenbach 2006; Wilson 2013). Yet, little attention has been paid to the way in which parents’ neighborhood exchanges might end up being “social mechanisms” (Gross 2009) that aggregate into structural patterns. People navigate most of their lives based on routines and habits. When they face novel situations,

their responses “involve an alternation between habit and creativity” (Gross 2009: 367). The social networks in which parents become enmeshed come about through their daily habits and provide the medium through which parents attempt creative solutions to solve the “problem” of finding schools for their children. The geographically circumscribed nature of these social networks, however, reduces the options that parents perceive as possible to solve the problem (Gross 2009; Zerubavel 1981).

In sum, although urban sociology has convincingly demonstrated associations between neighborhood context and outcomes, less attention has been devoted to the processes that create those associations. Scholars have not been sufficiently attuned to how daily routines of parents in a neighborhood influence life course decisions like school choice. We know neighborhoods are important in shaping daily interactions and social networks among parents and there is evidence that parents draw on social networks in making school decisions. However, research is still needed on the concrete ways in which neighborhood characteristics, parents’ social networks, and school choice decisions are interwoven.

DATA AND METHODS

STUDY DESIGN

Our data come from a larger study investigating choices parents make about homes and schools in a large Northeastern metropolitan area.² We draw on in-depth interviews carried out with 34 White middle- and upper-middle-class parents with a child between the ages of three and six; in most cases, this was the eldest child. The sample consists of 33 White families and one interracial family (i.e., white mother and an African American father). Most of the interviewees were mothers, but in some cases fathers also joined the interview. Most were married. Three mothers were single divorced parents, two of whom shared physical custody with their ex-husbands. Six of the mothers stayed home full time and another four worked part time. These mothers spent more time at the park than those mothers who worked away from the home, but the responses across the groups were largely similar.

We focused on white middle-class parents who live in racially integrated neighborhoods of a large Northeastern city. Since most middle-class Whites live in predominantly White suburban neighborhoods, these parents are unusual (Charles 2003; Lewis et al. 2011). The increasing number of White middle-class families living in central cities has led, however, to studies of school choice among middle-class Whites in central city neighborhoods (Billingham and Kimelberg 2013; Petrilli 2012; see Posey-Maddox et al. 2014 for review). Although our sample is small, we focus on using the data to improve our conceptual understanding of social processes, as Burawoy (1991) has argued qualitative data can do. We use our sample of White, middle-class, central-city parents to improve our conceptual understanding of the geography of school choice decisions.

To be categorized as middle-class, at least one parent had to be employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that draws upon college level certifications. Parents’ employment is listed in the third and fourth columns of Table 1. All of the families have at least one parent with a 4-year college degree and many parents acquired advanced degrees. Much of the research was conducted in 2008–2009, but additional interviews took place in 2011–2012.

TABLE 1. List of Parents' Occupations, School Catchment, and School Attended by Neighborhood

Family	Mother	Father	Public school catchment	School attended
<i>Ballenger Neighborhood (5 families)</i>				
Ackerman	Graphic designer	Photographer	Brownside	Brownside
Clark	Psychologist ¹	Engineer ¹	Brownside	Brownside
Kandis	Physical therapist	Publishing	Brownside	Brownside
Levenson	Restaurant owner	Restaurant owner	Brownside	Brownside
Stevenson	Art director	N/A ²	Brownside	Arch (private school)
<i>Union Ridge Neighborhood (9 families)</i>				
Black	Publishing	Arts management	Grey	Madison (private school)
Fried	Professor	High level manager	Grey	Global Charter
Nachmann	Shop owner	College professor	Grey	Ruled out Grey after a visit, but was unclear where to go at time of interview
O'Donnell	Art editor	College professor	Grey	Ledford (public transfer)
Palmer	Stay-at-home	Publishing	Grey	Kinder (private)
Schwartz	Personnel manager	N/A ²	Grey	Grey
Thompson	Stay-at-home	Lawyer	Grey	St. Moore (Catholic, private)
Winkler	Lawyer	Health care business owner	Grey	Suburban Catholic
Woods	Lawyer (part time)	Physician	Grey	Suburbs
<i>Langley Neighborhood (12 families)</i>				
Adler	Stay-at-home	Computer science	Lincoln	Artistic Charter
Becker	Stay-at-home	Insurance executive (recently laid off)	Walker	Ledford (public transfer)
Bradley	Stay-at-home	Finance	Walker	Hamilton (private)
Davis	Sales from home (part time)	Real estate	Lincoln	Moved to suburbs
Douglas	Social worker (part-time)	Publishing	Lincoln	Ledford (public transfer)
Everett	School counselor	Teacher	Walker	Franklin Charter
Grant	Health care administrator	Marketing	Northwood	Artistic Charter
Munson	Manager (recently laid off)	Construction	Lincoln	Lincoln
Nelson	Marketing	Administrator	Lincoln	(expected) Lincoln
Terra	Graphic designer (recently laid off)	Construction (BA)	Lincoln	Lincoln
Thomas	Social services	Developer	Thompson	Thompson
Woodley	Stay-at-home	Social worker	Northwood	Lincoln
<i>Milford Neighborhood (5 families)</i>				
Dixon	University administrator	Computer programmer	Martin	Clayton
Lutz	Psychologist	Music teacher	Lab Public	Children First Charter (planning to change schools, but unclear where to go)
Paulson	Administrator	Counselor	Martin	Unclear; possibly home schooling
Price	Museum senior administrator	Contractor	Martin	Undecided at time of interview
Verde	Adjunct professor	Professor	Martin	Ledford (public transfer)

(Continued)

TABLE 1. Continued

Family	Mother	Father	Public school catchment	School attended
<i>Thorndale Neighborhood (2 families)</i>				
Logan	Business owner (part time)	Business owner	Tilbert	Connelly (public transfer)
Turner (inter-racial couple; black dad, white mom)	Graphic designer	Architect	Trighton	Global Charter

¹Divorced parents with shared custody.

²Single mother, father makes no contribution.

Notes: Unless otherwise noted above, all families are two-parent households. The Palmer and Winkler family had lived in Union Ridge until just prior to the interview; since the interview focused on their time there we have grouped them accordingly. They both stayed within the city limits, but they moved to the edge of the city. Ms. Winkler was required to live within the city since she worked for the city; they sent their children to a Catholic school in the suburbs.

The in-depth interviews (Weiss 1995) typically lasted 90 minutes to 2 hours and usually occurred in the respondents' homes. Respondents were given an honorarium of \$50 and we usually brought a dessert as a friendly gesture. We wrote a handwritten thank you note after each interview. At the end of the interview, we asked each person to recommend other parents with children 3–6 years of age who were trying to decide where to send their children to school or who had recently made the decision.

We recruited parents through three methods. First, we recruited some parents through snowball samples beginning with three different acquaintances. Second, we sampled additional parents through two day-care centers. Third, we recruited a few parents that we met when we attended open houses at some private and public schools. We were concerned that the findings about social networks might have depended on our recruitment through a snowball sample, but parents recruited through day cares provided similar responses to parents recruited in the snowball sample. Parents came from multiple networks in five different neighborhoods that were in various stages along paths of gentrification (Table 1). Since we recruited families in various ways, we have an uneven representation from each neighborhood with five families from Ballinger and Milford, nine from Union Ridge, 12 from Langley, and only two from Thorndale. As with many qualitative studies, the focus of the research was emergent. After we began to see similar themes from parents in Ballinger and Union Ridge, we sought out families in other neighborhoods (using day care centers or other, new network ties).

The interview included questions about how parents came to live in their house, their thoughts on the neighborhood, and their school plans. We focused on how parents learned about school options as well as the factors parents considered in selecting and purchasing a home. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. After reading the interview transcripts, key themes emerged that the authors formalized into a coding scheme using Atlas.ti. While dozens of codes were employed in this process, some of the most recurrent were “perceptions of good school,” “rejecting a school,” “tension between parents,” and “information sharing between parents.” In this process, we looked for common themes as well as disconfirming evidence for the emerging argument (Miles and Huberman 1994).³ All names are pseudonyms.

THE NEIGHBORHOODS

Ballenger

Ballenger gentrified during the 1980s and 1990s. The neighborhood is in a historic section of town made up of quaint houses and small shops with brick sidewalks. Children often occupy the swings at a popular playground that also has a community garden. Many of the houses in the neighborhood were assigned to Brownside Elementary School, which has been one of the sought-after public elementary schools that many middle-class parents from across the city wanted their children to attend. Half of students at Brownside were eligible for free or reduced lunch, reflecting the economic diversity of the catchment area.

Union Ridge

The core of Union Ridge has gentrified, though many blocks remain home to a more economically diverse set of residents. The neighborhood is close to several large cultural institutions and two- to three-story row houses fill most streets; a corridor of trendy restaurants and coffee shops runs through the neighborhood that, while bustling at times, is less commercial than Ballenger. The neighborhood is near a large urban park and has several smaller parks interspersed throughout the neighborhood. Children in the neighborhood were zoned to attend Grey Elementary School, where 85% of the student body was eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Langley

Langley is a wide swath of land on one side of the city that has been transitioning. Skinny streets run through Langley on a regular grid, abutted on their sides by narrow sidewalks in front of small two-story row houses. Most residents of Langley are working class, though the composition can vary from block to block. Residents can visit a number of small parks in Langley and one large park with expansive grass fields, playground equipment for small children, and a dog run. Langley contains catchments for several elementary schools. One of those schools, Lincoln Elementary School, has a group of middle-class parents energetically working to reform it.

Milford

Stately homes overlook broad streets in Milford, a large neighborhood on the one side of the city. Over the years, landlords have subdivided many of those houses into apartments that frequently house students at nearby universities and young professionals who work downtown. Working-class, majority-Black neighborhoods adjoin two sides of Milford, and gentrification has occurred at these borders during the past two decades. A busy commercial thoroughfare includes a mixture of old and trendy shops and restaurants, all of which serve clientele from the neighborhood or its immediate vicinity that passes by a popular public park with a semi-weekly farmers' market. Homes in Milford that fall within the catchment of "Public Lab" school cost \$100,000 more than homes immediately out of the catchment. Most of the families we interviewed in this neighborhood lived near another school, Martin Elementary, that is on the edge of one gentrifying border of the neighborhood.

Thorndale

The Thorndale neighborhood experienced gentrification most recently among the neighborhoods. In the past dozen years, median home prices have risen from around \$68,000 to their price today of around \$260,000. It has many young people, “hipster” stores, as well as many restaurants and a reputation as a “cool” place to live, though areas in the neighborhood vary considerably. Thorndale has a well-manicured park, supported by a neighborhood association for families and children that also includes spaces for dogs and a community garden.

SHIFTING LIFE STAGES

Virtually all of the parents we interviewed expressed their love for living in the city. As young adults who had just finished college and entered the workforce, they reported being drawn to the city. Their faces lit up and they often smiled as they spoke of the joy of city life. For example, Susan Adler and her husband moved to the city when they were both 24. From a young age, she felt that her uncles who lived in the city had “the best of everything” and subsequently chose to move into their neighborhood:

I had two gay uncles [who] lived in Union Ridge for years... in a really cool like loft... like in a converted brewery, like really cool. So we knew that neighborhood because like we were always down there with them... They had the best of everything. They had parking, a cool place, a condo.

Similarly, Tony Grant and his wife moved to their house on a recently gentrified block in Langley eight years earlier, immediately after they got married. Before that, both had lived with their respective parents to save money. The house was on a “great block” and cost them \$200,000. They have since had two children, now ages five-and-a-half and two, respectively, and Tony reported that the neighborhood has “exploded” with new restaurants:

I feel like we got lucky, because there’s a lot of things around here that we didn’t see and didn’t know about that we just grew to love over time. The fact that [Main] Avenue totally exploded with bars and restaurants. They put up the fountain there. It’s just nice that the neighborhood’s improved so much. And it just turned out we got to know a lot of our neighbors really well. If whenever we move, we’ll probably continue to stay close to them.

The “coolness” of urban living and the amenities that it provided were the reasons that both Susan and Tony moved into their neighborhoods. Their life stage cultural sensibilities in young adulthood led them to enthusiastically make a choice about where to live that did not take into account their shifting priorities as they entered their next life stage as young parents.

Parents reported that they did not know about the scarcity of “good” public schools when they moved into their neighborhoods. Although married and planning to have a family, Tony and his wife acknowledged that they had “not really” considered schools before they bought their home. As another parent, Sophie Kandis, put it, she had “not even thought about schools when they first moved” because they were “just getting married so kids weren’t quite on our radar. They should have been, but they weren’t.”

For the Kandis family, their life decisions were made based on “just getting married” and the transition to adulthood.

Karin and Neil Nachman reported a similar experience. Karin was pregnant when they purchased their home and her mother (a school teacher in another large city’s school system) admonished them to consider schools. Instead, Karin and Neil talked to an acquaintance who directed them to the Union Ridge neighborhood where the houses were “cute,” the neighborhood seemed friendly to dogs, and people were similar to them:

We visited July 4th weekend and it’s just people were like on the streets, there were literally like kids in bare feet and grownups running and playing ball like in front of their houses. . . . There was a whole July 4th fair for children right [a few blocks away]. I mean it looked and it still does look . . . Union Ridge truly is the cutest. We love it. There were so many families and we have dogs, that was a huge issue. . . . And you know it was a lot about our dogs.

As time passed, Karin and Neil became more worried about where they would send their children to school:

I mean now that this is upon us you know, what was a joke to me four years ago is very real . . . but really my mother was beside herself that we weren’t even asking these questions . . . but school was just so remote.

She ruefully reports that they are now “over cute”:

It just sounds so stupid now to say, that “they [the houses] were so cute!” . . . Like we’re kind of over cute at this point with two children. But we were looking for different stuff then.

Although the Nachmans were expecting a child when they bought their house, they did not prioritize schools in their home search. The amenities provided by the city, including the amenities available to young families, drew them to their neighborhood and overpowered concerns raised by trusted family members.

Based on their previous life stage decisions, the parents in our sample had formed strong urban identities and many (but not all) considered a move to the suburbs to be unthinkable. Melody Lutz’s family has three children, aged 6 years, 3 years, and 15 months. She was a stay-at-home mother and her husband was attempting to get a small business off the ground with money that he had inherited. She was unhappy with her child’s charter school, yet they could not afford the private school she admired. But she and her husband absolutely rejected the idea of leaving the Milford neighborhood for the suburbs:

Absolutely no. We love this house. We love the neighborhood. There are so many neat community things going on. They’re learning so much from that they would never get from school . . . You know, I would never leave.

Other parents in the study shared this commitment to their lifestyle in the city. But the lack of forethought by parents regarding schools left them surprised and likely compounded their anxiety (see also Ball 2003b).

As the couples had children, they transitioned into a stage of their lives that led to new concerns. Despite being enamored with their neighborhoods, parents reported that they came to doubt whether their neighborhoods could offer their children sufficient educational advantages. For example, Ingrid Clark cried with relief when she learned that her ex-husband would pay for private school instead of sending their son to Brownside, their local public school.

I remember I was standing in the kitchen and I was on the phone and he was like “Well, I absolutely I’m not gonna compromise her education.” I mean [my ex-husband] is really bright. You know, he’s like a very well educated and bright person. . . . But he was like “I have every intention of paying for it.” I mean I burst into crying on the phone ‘cause . . . I mean I make a teacher salary. He had been to Brownside the week before. He HATED IT. He said “I don’t want my kid to go to school with the security guard in the hall way, bars in the window.”

The many attractive features of their gentrified urban neighborhood became less important for most parents than their feelings that their neighborhood lacked a public school that was good enough for their children. Out of the more than one hundred public elementary schools in the entire district, the parents described only four or five traditional public schools as viable options for their children. There was a very restrictive transfer process for students who did not live in one of these four or five catchment areas, but the highly regarded schools almost exclusively enrolled children that lived in their own catchments. The prices of homes in the school catchments were as much as \$100,000 more than comparable homes outside the catchments. Parents also considered a handful of charter schools and a number of private schools as well.

Consistent with previous research on White parents choosing schools (Billingham and Hunt 2016; Lauen 2007; Renzulli and Evans 2005; Saporito 2003; Sikink and Emerson 2008), parents preferred schools that enrolled fewer black and Latino students, had fewer economically disadvantaged students, and were located in some of the wealthiest neighborhoods compared to the average public school in the city. The schools parents preferred also tended to have higher test scores than most other public schools in the city. However, parents did not refer to these quantifiable data (Ball and Vincent 1998; but see Weininger 2014). Rather, as we show below, when faced with this “problem situation” (Gross 2009), parents referred to the reputation of schools, which they learned about through their conversations with other parents in the neighborhood.

INTERACTIONS IN NEIGHBORHOOD SPACES

NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED SOCIAL NETWORKS

Although research in urban sociology makes clear that social networks are important elements of neighborhoods (Burgess 1984; Duneier 1999; Simmel 1950), there are relatively few detailed, empirical studies that show *how* neighborhood parents turn to social networks as they approach key life moments. In a related vein, sociology of education studies have focused on how parents place high value on “hot knowledge”—recent information based on other parents’ personal experiences with a school—rather than “cold knowledge”—like test scores and information on school policies produced through bureaucratic reporting. These studies have not, however, focused on the role of local geographic settings such as parks for the transmission of “hot knowledge” (Ball and Vincent 1998).

The White middle-class parents living in central city neighborhoods told us of the frequent exchanges about schools that occurred in neighborhood spaces. Indeed, the parents we interviewed were unanimous on the importance of playgrounds in their lives. The shared schedules and rituals of middle-class parenting choreographed daily interactions on playgrounds. Many parents reported that the relationships that they

developed on playgrounds were important for their own adjustments to parenthood. Anya Logan, a stay-at-home mother married to an attorney, described this sentiment when she described how she learned about schools:

On the playground. When you're home with a kid you will talk to anybody with a fucking kid 'cause you're like, "I'm so isolated" ... and then playgroups, you have the same age kids.

For mothers who felt isolated, the playground offered opportunities to overcome the profound loneliness that can come with raising small children.

In addition to playgrounds, other venues such as yoga classes, day care pick-ups, and community gardens could be valuable meeting places, as the Turners, an inter-racial couple living in Thorndale, described:

Mr. Turner: We have a strong network of the day care that we take our kids to [that] is probably, probably one of the more revered, preschools.

Ms. Turner: It's a nice place and there's some strong, strong connection with the other parents.

Mr. Turner: One of the reasons it's one of the premier ... community efforts have really banded the community together to produce usable amenities within the community like parks, dog parks, all kinds of stuff.

Small's (2009) work has shown how a day care requirement for parent involvement fostered social capital, but the parents in our study report that parents got to know each other as they waited to pick up children at day cares or walked their dogs, not through formal organizational requirements. The shared schedules and temporal regularity fostered social cohesion among parents and an expectation that they shared similar values (Zerubavel 1981, 1999). Organizational ties such as those that the Turners describe differ from more casual interactions that occur in neighborhood spaces.

But, the Turners' comments reveal the manner in which local organizations (the preschool was in the neighborhood) reinforce existing spatial patterns within neighborhoods. Similarly, Octavia Nielson reported looking to meet other mothers so that her daughter would have "someone to play with" and turned to local neighborhood spaces of the YMCA and the local playground. Ms. Nielson, a married mother with a 3.5-year-old and another baby expected soon, moved to the city from San Francisco. To this day, she continues to meet new people there in these important spaces:

I meet people at the Y... [and] I know a woman there who her kid was barely 3 and he was already reading, you know, she just really focused on it. But I also think, in the ideal world, kids wouldn't need to learn to read that soon.

Ms. Nielson found that the focus on children was not unique. And although she found the mothers at the playground to be "mean," she still went almost daily after work:

I go to the playground a fair amount after work so I have a lot of interaction with ... moms who aren't actually in [her] classroom ... and I was like, 'Geez, these women. They're just so mean' ... They're all like hyper focused on their kids' academics ... [and] just seemed snotty and insensitive.

Mothers spoke of relying on neighbors to help pick schools, “the same way” that they relied on local networks to pick day cares. When asked how she selected potential schools, she replied:

... everybody in our playground is going there. I mean for real like every neighbor, everybody I know from my gym on Martin Avenue like it seems to be same schools over and over, sort of the same way we pick daycare you know. Like that’s where everybody was going. So those are the ones that we looked at.

For these mothers, their longstanding neighborhood networks were created and reinforced through geographical proximity. The repeated interactions on playgrounds and other neighborhood spaces became, according to these parents, a means to acquire information about schools. Without longitudinal data we cannot definitively establish the contribution of playgrounds and local spaces to the formation of social networks, but most mothers reported that they developed friendships in those spaces.

Many parents also received information about schools through neighborhood e-mail lists. In addition to discussing the importance of parks and playgroups, Anya Logan mentioned her neighborhood e-mail list, or listserv:

And we have a great mommy listserv that [a]...group of mommies set up... you can ask to be in the listserv and then you get invited and we share information, tons of information. Nannies available, babysitters, you frickin’ name it: plumbers, pre-schools, how do I apply to elementary school, everything...you name it, it’s out there.

The e-mail list was a medium that parents used to communicate about their shared neighborhood space. In fact, some communities restricted membership to the e-mail lists to those who could prove their residence in the neighborhood. For example, only Union Ridge parents were allowed to join their list:

There’s a very strong parent community so there’s something that is known as the Union Ridge Parents’ Listserv... Basically it’s set up for anybody who lives in and around the neighborhood and you find out about it [through] word of mouth and ask to join. Once you’re confirmed to either [be] pregnant or have children, you’re allowed in.

The “word of mouth” information, like that garnered on the playground, was a prerequisite to get an invitation to the even larger flow of information available through the e-mail lists. Moreover, by closing membership to those outside of the neighborhood, e-mail lists ensured that locally shared information was only available to confirmed members of the neighborhood.

A FLOW OF VALUABLE INFORMATION

As the challenges that parents faced evolved over the few years since they entered the neighborhoods, daily interactions also evolved. Playground talk about schools became more prevalent as children got older. In addition to offering companionship and helping each other cope with the transition to parenthood, playgrounds also became places where parents gleaned information and commiserated over the challenges and anxiety related to schools. Mandi Nelson, a married mother who worked full-time in marketing and whose children were four and two, reported constant “neighborhood talk” about schools:

The conversation is which charter school are you applying to? Have you heard? How do you get in? How long you've been on the waiting list? Which neighborhood, which catchment are you in for public school if you're going to send them to public school? So are you in a good catchment, are you in a bad catchment?

Through neighborhood interactions, parents developed a shared understanding of which schools were and were not acceptable. When parents took their children to the playground, the choice of schools was a constant topic of conversation as parents would "check in" to see where all of their friends' children were headed to school. Allie, a professor, described the interactions at her local playground this way:

There's a playground around the corner, so we are there constantly, probably every day. If there is another parent of a kid in her cohort whom we know—we know most of them—it (schools) became one of the check-in questions, like 'How are you?'

Catherine Woods echoed this view. She said that the topic often surfaced on the playground:

It comes up frequently. It's a very common topic of conversation. What do you do about school? Where's your kid going to school next year? Are you going to be staying in the city, are you moving? You know, that kind of a thing. It's pretty common.

When asked to guess how often schools came up in conversation during a week, she replied:

A lot. I mean, it depends on when I, I'm sort of hanging out at the playground... it often comes up, if we're at the playground talking to... someone that I'm not very close friends with. You know, you just bump into a parent that you know from the neighborhood you don't really know. I mean, then it comes up I think almost every conversation.

This spatially embedded social interaction was crucial for these White middle-class parents to negotiate their personal and shared anxiety around educational opportunities for their children. Many of these parents had attended highly desirable schools growing up and were now worried that their children would not have those same opportunities in an urban school district.⁴

We asked parents if they discussed school choice issues with people other than neighborhood friends. Some reported talking to relatives including those who lived in the suburbs. But parents complained that advice from relatives was less valuable than advice from neighbors. At times, suburban relatives were very critical. For example, after not gaining admission for her son to a very elite private school (where she was "overly confident" that he would be admitted), Ms. Terra sent her kindergartener to Lincoln, her public catchment school. Lincoln is a school where over 85% of children were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The racial demographics of the school were 35% Black, 35% Latino, 17% Asian, 10% White, and 2% other. Other White middle-class parents in the neighborhood were enthusiastic about trying to make Lincoln more attractive to middle-class parents. Still, when they learned of her kindergarten decision, her suburban relatives were appalled:

They're like, 'Are you kidding? What, are you crazy? What do you think, you're going to be Miss like Great White Hope? Or do you think you're going to fix everything? Like get out of there.'

But, on a day-to-day basis, neighborhood friends were positive and gave her confidence in her decision:

I'm around people here who are really hoping the school's going to be good, so they're kind of like pumping me up, 'Okay, keep going and let me know we can help and keep us posted.' So it's more of a proximity, who am I around . . . on a day-to-day basis who do I interact with?

Parents valued the shared information about the climate or reputation of schools with other parents in the neighborhood through word of mouth.

Rarely, however, did they discuss the school's aggregate test scores despite mandates given to schools to test students and share the results (e.g., requirements implemented in No Child Left Behind). Although parents could recall other important numbers like the price of their home, the interest rate, and class size, they were often vague about test scores. In some instances, parents relied heavily on one friend who took the lead to learn about schools; this person became a trusted guide. Cristina Palmer, a stay-at-home mother of one 6-year-old boy, was formerly a high-level manager earning \$200,000 a year. Her work involved looking at research reports, but in the search for schools she relied heavily on the guidance of her friend Sarah, who, according to Cristina, "did a lot of research." Even when Cristina went on websites, she did not look at test scores:

Interviewer: Did you look at websites for the schools when you looked at the schools?

Ms. Palmer: Yeah, I must have done. I'd look at parent involvement. I'd look at the curriculum if I could.

Interviewer: Test scores? Did you look at test scores?

Ms. Palmer: You know, I didn't. Sarah would definitely look at test scores. I didn't. Which sounds odd really, but, no, I didn't.

In our interviews, parents discussed the input of friends in their networks rather than the academic achievement information on websites (but see Weininger 2014).

We were struck by the similarities across neighborhoods in the accounts parents gave of the role that relationships with neighbors and local encounters played in their school choice decisions. All of the parents mentioned talking with neighbors about the local public schools as they took their children to the local playgrounds and parks. Other children's parents and staff members at local day cares were valuable sources of information (see Small 2009). While the role of parks and other local neighborhood settings might seem obvious, this feature as a conduit of information is underdeveloped in both school choice and housing search literatures that tend to focus on families in relative isolation. Less frequently studies focus on networks but without rooting the networks in local, geographically based neighborhood spaces.

HETEROGENEOUS RESPONSES IN HOMOPHILOUS NEIGHBORHOOD NETWORKS

The flow of information through neighbors and neighborhood spaces shows that the seemingly independent actions of individual parents were in fact quite intertwined. The parents faced what Gross (2009) calls a "problem situation." The parents had come, throughout their lives, to expect middle-class neighborhoods to have well-reputed

schools. This habituated response meant that they had a difficult time fathoming the possibility that schools would not meet their expectations, especially since schools to new parents seemed, as Ms. Nachman said, “so remote” when their children were infants. Parents applied creative (i.e., nonhabitual) responses to the problem situation. The heterogeneous responses contradict previous accounts that assume homogeneous responses by middle-class parents based on a dominant habitus (e.g., Butler and Robson 2003). Instead, we found that relationships developed through interactions in neighborhood space became fraught with tension that revealed disagreements over decisions, especially because parents realized that the decisions of their neighbors would influence their children’s futures.

Parents realized that the advantages their children enjoyed in schools and their neighborhood depended on other parents making similar decisions. If other parents sent their children to other schools or moved away, opportunities for their children to socialize with other (middle-class White) neighborhood children might diminish. Parents sought out—and hoped to influence—the decisions of each other to help arrange their own children’s futures, to know who would be classmates and who would remain neighbors.

In Union Ridge, some White middle-class parents were trying to mobilize to make the local school more attractive to other middle-class White parents. Many parents described tension around Grey Elementary School, the public school in their neighborhood. Most students enrolled at Grey were low income and Black. Although test scores were not as high as the “good” schools, they were consistently higher than the district averages. Some parents thought that if more middle-class White parents sent their children to Grey, the school would become an attractive option for similar parents in the neighborhood. For several years, a number of White middle-class parents have become active in the PTA and organized events for prospective parents in efforts to make the school a more attractive option for other middle-class and White families.

Iliana Turoff, a divorced mother, has been very active in Union Ridge organizations: She was at various times president of the board of her neighborhood organization, a ward committee member for the local political party, and PTA president of Grey Elementary, where she sent her son. She described being “pulled in” to sending her son to Grey Elementary by a “good set of parents that lived around the corner from us.” Iliana became active in the school and energetically recruited other White middle-class parents to the neighborhood school:

A small contingent of parents and neighborhood folks have always wanted Grey to be adopted as a neighborhood school and have been working for a long time—well, it seems like a long time—to have that happen and it’s just not really taking off. And so it’s always been fine for my kids because my kids are, you know, smart and well supported, but it gets exhausting sort of defending yourself all the time. . . . It’s just not really taking off.

In indicating the “exhausting” nature of “defending” herself, Iliana highlights both the intensely personal nature of school choice decisions (Cucchiara and Horvat 2014) and the value she places on maintaining her neighborhood relationships and social networks. Friends and acquaintances in the neighborhood who did not send their children to Grey would constantly ask her about the school. As parents considered Grey, and then rejected it, their actions had implications for parents like Iliana who were seeking to change the local school (Posey-Maddox et al. 2016). The question of sending a child to Grey was framed not in individualistic terms but in collective terms since parents did not want their

children to be one of the first White middle-class students to go to the school. Parents wanted the school to be good enough, often meaning they wanted other middle-class White neighborhood families to enroll their children in the school, before they were willing to enroll their own children.

Iliana found these interactions tiresome: “I’m just exhausted and leave me alone and I’m tired of defending cause it always feels like a defense.” Iliana’s social connections were based around the friendships she built in the neighborhood. She describes her life as a parent, since pregnancy, being intertwined with her friend and her friend’s husband. Their lives had followed the same rhythm to this point. What was at stake for Iliana was not only the all-consuming decision about where to send her child to school, but also the future of her friendships that she had built over many years of daily interaction in the neighborhood. The emotional toll that it took on her expressed itself in the exhaustion that she felt.

As the school choice process unfolded, Iliana received a note from her good friend’s husband, Doug, that they were not sending their son to Grey. When Iliana asked why, he said “I’m just not comfortable there.” In the end, he sent Iliana a handwritten note that made her “crazy:”

Doug sent me a letter, I was like crazy, but in the end we’re friends, but he said something like “I think that anybody who has the means would choose to send their kids to private school,” and I said that I disagreed. . . . I said to him, “No hard feelings, I appreciate it’s a very personal decision for people and I don’t want you to think that I don’t like you because of your decisions. Your decisions are your own.” That was my first experience but there have been so many. . . . I mean we did the whole pregnancy thing together, raising kids together, and then kind of went like that, different directions [demonstrating with her hands parting in the air].

Doug’s expressed opinion that “anyone with the means would choose to send their children to a private school” highlights how class and race are at the heart of conflict even within predominantly White middle-class networks. As we consider the role of individual choices in aggregate inequality, this exchange shows that both responses would reinforce existing inequality. While Doug and his wife chose the conventional route of opting out of public schools altogether, Iliana views success only in terms of making Grey a “neighborhood school” by recruiting other White middle-class neighbors to enroll their children there.

Another option that parents considered was leaving the neighborhood. A good deal of attention has been paid recently to the social aspects of selecting neighborhoods (e.g., Crowder and Krysan 2016; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014; Sampson 2012), but none have examined how parents view the interrelatedness of their decisions. Parents understood that moves to the suburbs by families affected the social networks of parents and children alike. Allie described how many of her son’s playmates had moved away:

General attrition in the neighborhood is huge. I was at the playground the other day and [of] the families who we’ve grown up with so far, there seems to have been a kind of decapitation of the cohort.

Parents in other neighborhoods also described “losing” part of their networks to the suburbs. When Mandi Nelson, who lived in Langley, was asked if she had heard of a nearby suburban district, she indicated that she had growing expertise on suburban school systems since so many of her friends had moved away:

We do now because, you know, because we have kids and we're sort of tapped into that whole network, and now, you know, a lot, we've lost a lot of friends to the 'burbs. A lot of people are moving out of the city and going to the suburbs and it's all school, it's always the school. They're willing to take longer commutes and so they can have the school.

The community changed as some decided to move and others recommitted to their neighborhood and the networks that had developed there.

The need to find "good schools" that is so deeply rooted in geographic, racial, and class inequality caused some families to move to the suburbs even when they experienced significant personal distress and tensions in their friendship networks. For example, Catherine Woods, a lawyer who lived with her husband—a doctor—and their 6-year-old and 4-year-old children, had moving boxes in the living room of her small, city row house when we interviewed her. Although deeply distressed to be leaving the city, she felt that they had no other choice:

We love being in the city, love that we can walk everywhere. I hate driving. . . . We're both very social people. I love walking outside and bumping into all my neighbors. We've made very close friends in the neighborhood and that is very tough for us. But it just came down to financial really, and the schools. If we could've found something we would've been happy with here for our children's school, we probably would've stayed. I mean, it was also house, we also wanted a bigger house and . . . the houses here that we would want are much more expensive than . . . comparable houses in the suburbs. So it was both.

Although she noted some benefits to the suburbs, such as ease of parking, she is worried about "being lonely" and "isolated" in the suburbs. But it was the schools that had pushed her and her husband to make the decision that summer. They couldn't afford private school and they rejected Grey because it was "not a good school." The complex transfer system meant that they would not learn if their son was admitted to one of the four "good" public schools until August; "we couldn't wait," she said. Furthermore, she felt that Ledford, the public school into which many of the city parents were clamoring to get their children, was not impressive: "I don't know if I would've been happy there in a couple years."

Catherine and her husband sold their house and bought one in the suburbs. Some neighbors in their social networks were highly critical of their decision. She recounted what one friend would say:

She feels very strongly that the suburbs [are] a horrible place to be and, no one should ever want to live there. If you're a smart, educated person, you should only be in the city. [She would say,] 'Oh, I have this friend of ours who was out in the suburbs two years ago. It's so funny, I just talked to her and she hates it, she's moving back.'

The residential decisions strained their friendship. Catherine finally sat her friend down:

One of my best friends. I actually had to have a talk with her . . . We actually had to go for drinks and I had to say to her, 'Listen, you know I love you, but I am moving so you need to stop making me feel that this was a bad decision or it's going to ruin our, it's going to hurt our friendship.'

Although the elevated degree of this conflict was unusual in our sample, the constant chatter about and conflicting perspectives on residential and school options was not.

Catherine's interaction with her friend, like Iliana and Doug's interaction about Grey, showed how meaningful neighborhood networks were to parents. These were not passing acquaintances or "disposable ties" (Desmond 2012) that could be mined for information. They were strong ties that connected parents to one another that influenced the decision-making process. Even if parents went along with their first inclinations, the distress and tension that they described experiencing affected their lives. Studies have highlighted the conflicting assessments parents can hear about schools (Ball and Vincent 1998; Cucchiara and Horvat 2014) and have documented interclass and interracial conflicts arising from parental mobilization to transform local elementary schools (Cucchiara 2013; Petrilli 2012; Posey-Maddox 2014). Studies have not always captured the full-blown conflict that can develop among parents within a social network as they come to different conclusions about this irreversible decision. Studies of gentrifying neighborhoods, in particular, tend to emphasize interclass or interracial conflict over the type of conflict we demonstrate here.

DISCUSSION

We argue that urban sociology has overlooked how daily routines, particularly those involving the reproductive work of child-rearing, influence social networks that in turn affect the process parents use to make life-altering decisions that, in aggregate, have the potential to perpetuate inequality. Although sharing neighborhood spaces makes interactions among neighbors more likely, developing local support networks depends on repeated interactions that occur through the rhythm of daily life (Pred 1977). When we miss the manner in which space matters for processes that occur on different temporal scales—daily and across the life course—we risk missing how neighborhood spaces influence major life decisions.

The parents in our study reported developing social networks through their repeated interactions with other parents at playgrounds as they fulfilled their daily child-rearing routines. According to parents, these networks evolved as children grew older and the networks became crucial sources of support upon which parents relied to make a major life decision for their children. That the conflicts became personal showed the degree to which the support parents received was not simply instrumental or transactional. Many of the mothers in particular revealed the valuable emotional support that networks provided as they transitioned into parenthood. The interaction of parents in the same spaces at the same times promoted the formation of both strong and weak ties that seemed to affect how parents decided where to send their child to school. Other scholars have shown the importance of class- and race-based social networks in neighborhoods. Our research builds on this by highlighting the key role of life stage in shaping social networks, the flow of information and ultimately, life course decisions.

Gleaning information from social networks affected, according to parents, how they decided where to send their children to school. Parents feared making the "wrong" choice since they perceived that doing so could prevent their children from reproducing their own economic status. As others have noted (Cucchiara and Horvat 2014), parents saw a school choice decision as a moment where their identities as parents were called into question. When faced with this critical decision regarding the trajectory of their children's life course, they reported turning to their neighborhood friends, with whom

they developed meaningful emotional attachments in the course of daily interaction, to navigate this life course transition.

By relying on the neighborhood-based social networks they developed during earlier life stages, parents reported developing consensus on viable schools that limited choices to a small subset of options. Interactions at playgrounds and other neighborhood spaces substantially narrowed what options these White middle-class parents perceived as viable (Zerubavel 1999). Although conflicts arose over which of the limited choices parents chose, the flow of information among neighbors structured how parents, as agents, made their decisions. Because the network was relatively homophilous due to neighborhood segregation and the strong class basis for daily routines, the information gleaned from these local networks made some choices more likely than others. In aggregate, these decisions could affect where children attended school and in which neighborhoods they lived. Daily child-rearing routines, in other words, became a mechanism that structured how parents approached the decision about schools even if they ended up using their agency to make different choices from one another (Gross 2009).

Our results also support Rose's (1984) call for more research on the ways in which reproductive labor shapes neighborhoods and cities. At one temporal scale, the daily routines of child rearing make up the daily reproductive labor expected of middle-class families. By ignoring how those daily routines shape interactions, we risk ignoring how neighborhood spaces shape social networks. At a longer temporal scale, middle-class parents make decisions that they see as crucial to the reproduction of privilege for their children when they decide where to send their children to school. The intersection of these two temporal patterns—daily routines and life course transitions—around consequential decisions could inform future research on other major life-course decisions including where to move, whether and where to attend college, or employment opportunities. Obviously, the places and routines involved would be different than those described in this article, but interrogating how daily routines shape repeated interactions with others that end up affecting the decisions throughout one's life could be a useful lens through which urban scholars could view the importance of place in the reproduction of inequality.

LIMITATIONS OF SCOPE AND SUBSTANCE

Our methods limit the degree to which we can draw explicit conclusions about the influence that neighborhoods have on future inequality. Eliciting parents' own expressions of the process among a few dozen residents precludes the possibility of independently observing how parents interact in spaces. We believe, however, that our findings reveal a relevant direction for future ethnographers to study by examining the intersection of daily routines at specific spans of the life-course. Participant observation provides a method to ascertain how parents coalesce in space and time, and explicitly adding life-course stages into ethnographic analysis could provide more analytical leverage to ethnographers studying how social interactions affect social inequality. Leveraging these data can help improve our understanding about the influence of social networks on school and neighborhood choice. Relying on the hindsight of parents in interviews also makes it impossible to independently assess how much interactions affected the ultimate outcome of decisions. A combination of participant-observation and population-based

sampling could provide more insight to this question, but only if they focus on routine interactions in neighborhood spaces.

In addition, our small sample of White middle-class parents cannot be used to explain migration flows. It does, however, point to ways in which quantitative researchers could consider such questions. When researchers consider ties created by moves between neighborhoods, as Sampson (2012) has recently done, one could investigate the degree to which age homophily among children in the neighborhood affects flows of people between neighborhoods. By examining a middle- and upper-middle-class sample, we are studying the decision-making processes of families with the economic and social capital that affords them a broad range of choice. In order to develop a holistic understanding of the reproduction of inequality further research must be done within less privileged urban communities. In addition, although we might use these findings to speculate about parents of other racial and class groups, conclusions about other groups remain beyond the scope of our study.

We suspect that the degree of conflict in this case might be atypical, given the concerns among these middle-class White parents about maintaining their social networks within the gentrifying neighborhood. Such conditions, however, could exist in other domains around children's lives among other groups. We would speculate, for example, that the content of discussions about schools and levels of disagreement would differ by race; Black, Latino, and Asian parents might worry about whether their children would be the only students of color and about the racism of teachers and administrators (Lacy 2007; Lareau 2011). We expect that routine interactions among parents would affect how they address these concerns, though future studies would need to confirm this to be the case.

The theoretical model we describe here indicates that we would expect local social networks to matter when several conditions are met. We would expect local interactions to create life-course dependent social ties when consensus exists about dominant child-rearing practices. Since part of our argument relies on repeated interactions in space and time, we would only expect relationships to emerge when parents share similar beliefs about when and where they regularly take their children, and the means to do so. External context such as safety and availability of shared spaces designed for children would also affect whether parents interact in the same spaces. We also posit that interactions would be more likely to emerge in informal settings when parents have a high degree of autonomy in their days, including the flexibility of daily schedules and the flexibility to take time out of the workforce. For settings where parents' schedules are more regulated or they have less time at home, the requirements of formal settings like day cares might be more relevant.

CONCLUSION

Incorporating life-course specific daily interactions into urban theory could help address how neighborhood spaces shape major life decisions. We add to the literature by highlighting the influence of neighborhood-based social networks in parents' reports of their decision-making process. Our study provides evidence that shared parenting routines when children were very young evolved into important conduits of information and emotional support upon which parents relied in the future. According to these parents, the neighborhood-based social networks shaped what information they received

about school choices and influenced how they proceeded with their decisions. These highly valued neighborhood networks were both crucial to the flow of information, and put under strain by the high stakes and personal nature of school choice decisions. Investigating how recurring daily interactions specific to a particular life stage affect decision-making across other settings could provide a useful lens through which urban sociologists can understand how neighborhood spaces structure inequality.

Notes

¹A separate line of research investigates the collective consequences of middle-class parents' efforts to improve their children's life chances *after* deciding to send their children to under-resourced urban schools (see Cucchiara 2013; Cucchiara and Horvat 2009; Petrilli 2012; Posey-Maddox 2014) or attracting middle-class residents to attend local schools (see Posey-Maddox, Kimelberg, and Cucchiara 2014 for a review). Less attention focuses on how parents form choice sets from which they decide where to send their children to school (but see Bell 2006).

²The larger study involved observations in suburban schools. In order to gain access to the schools, the researchers promised confidentiality to the school officials. Hence, the name of the city cannot be revealed here. Although each city is unique, other emerging research (including Kimelberg and Billingham 2013; Posey-Maddox 2014) suggests middle-class parents in other cities face similar challenges.

³In the quotations we eliminated stutters, false starts, repetitions of words, and utterances such as "like," "you know," and "um" when they did not shift the meaning. In a few instances, we have altered the order of sentences to improve readability.

⁴Numerous studies have shown that middle-class parents adopt "concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2011), "intensive parenting" (Hays 1998), or "anxious" parenting (Nelson 2010) where they heavily scrutinize options for their children. All of these studies reveal that middle-class parents are especially concerned about their children's educational performance.

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