

**"Hearsay, Taken-for-Granted Knowledge, and Housing Decisions"**

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Comments appreciated!

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As is well known, the United States is marked by high levels of economic inequality. Moreover, because of residential clustering, American families generally live in class-segregated neighborhoods. From gated communities to apartment buildings in inner cities, Americans of different social classes tend to live in different places. These different locations do not appear to be fully explained by differences in housing stock and housing prices. Rather, individuals and families are also drawn to live in different places.

Of course, racial segregation has also historically been a very powerful factor. Moreover, this factor intersects with class-based forms of segregation in complicated ways, particularly for black families. Middle-class black families live in more economically heterogeneous neighborhoods than do comparable white middle-class families (Pattillo, 2013). Poor blacks often also live in overwhelmingly black neighborhoods. Nonetheless, middle-class black families are much more likely to live in predominantly white neighborhoods than are working-class black families (Pattillo, 2013; Lacey, 2007). These patterns matter for families with children, in particular, because, as a substantial body of literature shows, neighborhood conditions impact children's life chances (Sharkey, 2012). Above and beyond the resources that parents provide, children growing up in different neighborhoods often have different life chances in a host of areas (Sampson, 2013). Indeed, for about three-quarters of children in America, school assignment is a function of the neighborhood catchment area (Goyette, forthcoming). Economic segregation in schools has been tied to educational outcomes (Reardon and Bischoff, 2011). Neighborhoods also differ in the parks, pools, libraries and other services they provide to children, as well as the hazards that they pose. Thus, residential decisions directly affect important social experiences; taken together these factors can contribute to the maintenance of social class inequality over time. There is evidence that economic residential segregation has increased significantly over time (Reardon and Bischoff, 2011).

To reduce social class inequality in neighborhood composition, we need to understand *how* parents and children get sorted into different neighborhoods. Nonetheless, there is limited research on this topic. In particular, while a vast number of studies have mapped the contours of class and race segregation in the U.S. (see Goyette, forthcoming for a review), and others have examined the contribution that various factors makes to families' residential preferences (Charles, 2009; Krysan and Bader, 2009), remarkably few researchers have sought examine the micro-level processes involved in residential decision-making. The classic work in the field, Peter Rossi's book, *Why Families Move*, was published in 1955. Rossi focused on the critical role of life stage and demographic transitions in triggering moves. To be sure, there has been some more important recent work. Krysan and Bader (2009) demonstrate racial differences in the knowledge that blacks, whites, and Latinos have of local communities in Chicago. More specifically, they show that whites had often never heard of communities which were predominantly black; blacks, who generally were much more knowledgeable than whites about local communities, were not familiar with distant predominantly white suburbs. Sampson (2012), analyzing mobility patterns in Chicago, shows that the destination neighborhoods of low-income families with housing vouchers were similar to those of families without vouchers, implying that factors above and beyond financial considerations played a considerable role. Indeed, his data indicate that families were disproportionately likely to settle in neighborhoods where former neighbors had also moved. This suggests that residential choices are, to some extent, conditioned by information sharing in the neighborhood of origin. Sharkey fruitfully conceptualizes this phenomenon in terms of "cognitive constraints," which he defines as "individuals' mental

perceptions and understandings of which communities are possible residential destinations” (2012, p 16).<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, problems remain in the study of residential sorting. Disproportionately, recent studies have focused on the poor (Sharkey, 2012, Rhodes and DeLuca, forthcoming) or urban residents, specifically Chicago residents (Sampson, 2012; Krysan and Bader, 2009). Yet, a growing number of families live in the suburbs. In addition, it is unclear whether and how phenomena such as “cognitive constraints” affect non-poor families. More importantly, while many studies acknowledge that individuals are located within complex social structures, the role of networks in the formation of the residential choice set has not been sufficiently elaborated. Additionally, the role of cultural taste or fit (Allen , 2002) has gotten less attention. Our paper seeks to redress these gaps in the literature by using interview data from a large Northeastern City and its surrounding suburbs gathered from parents of young children to examine the decision-making process that leads families of different backgrounds to particular neighborhoods.

To preview the argument, our interviews showed remarkable consistency in the residential selection process across race and class. Although the parents we studied ended up in very different neighborhoods, the process they described was similar. We make three points about this process.

First, it is hard to overstate the importance of networks in the formation of residential preferences. Many parents relied heavily on their relations with trusted network sources when deciding upon a neighborhood. Networks contacts also helped to guide them to specific apartments or streets within a neighborhood. Other families simply wanted to live close to family. The centrality of networks in the process appears to derive, at least in part, from the homophily they were characterized by: networks served as conduits for the influence of individuals with similar dispositions and sensibilities. And, the kinds of neighborhoods that network contacts recommended differed significantly by social class and, by a lesser extent, by race. Due to the economic homogeneity of the neighborhoods in which parents lived, as well as the relatively modest cost of housing in the area in which we did the study, few families in our data were priced out of neighborhoods they desired. It did happen, but it was not common.

Second, many researchers have assumed that the residential search process is systematic, drawn out, research-based, and guided by information.<sup>2</sup> For example, policy makers were very surprised

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<sup>1</sup> Sharkey also discusses “structural constraints” which he defines as those “arising from the interaction of the supply of affordable housing and the economic resources that individuals bring to the housing market (2012, p. 16). For cognitive constraints, Sharkey writes: “Individuals' ideas about possible residential destinations may be based on familiarity (or lack of familiarity) with an area, a sense of whether the individual would “fit” in the community, perceptions of the history of the community, or a range of other factors that affect the individual's understanding about whether a given community is a realistic residential destination.” (2012, p 16). Sharkey also cites Shroder’s (2002) use of the term psychological constraints.

<sup>2</sup> Parents were embedded in social structure and there were countless ways in terms of roads, highways, public transportation, property taxes, zoning, many public policies had an impact on the neighborhood that they ended up living in. And these were the structures in which they lived their lives. It would be foolish not to think that structures mattered including the Federal Housing Authority policies, redlining, housing discrimination, racial discrimination in bank loans, credit, debt, as well as the 2008 mortgage crisis. See, among others, Massey and

that the Move to Opportunity voucher recipients tended to move to nearby near-poor neighborhoods rather than to more affluent neighborhoods. Our research suggests that the formation of residential choice sets is often vague, somewhat haphazard, and guided by heavily truncated *mental maps*. These mental maps, which we define as simplified mental representations of the geographical area, appear to be crucial in terms of framing the (limited) choice sets parents considered. Put differently, parents immediately “greyed out” most options when choosing where to live—that is, they rejected, without any explicit consideration, the vast majority of feasible options. This action was not simply a matter of reducing the choices to a manageable number, since families did not consider neighborhoods which offered contrasting options. Instead, we found these mental maps to consist of homogenous choices of communities containing “people like us.” In our study, drawing on these mental maps, the parents decided very rapidly which neighborhoods to move to, and did so with only vague (and incomplete) information. Typically, they did not carry out any kind of systematic research—no matter what their class or race. Although a number of the parents we interviewed had grown up in the area, many had not. Members of the latter group had only fuzzy knowledge of a neighborhood when they began to search for housing within it. Once they had selected a neighborhood, however, they became much more systematic as they tried to decide on a house or apartment, gathering extensive information, comparing options, and so forth. But the very consequential decision about which neighborhood to move to was not, at least in our sample, the result of systematic research or consideration. Although the region we studied had over 100 small school districts within a forty-five minute drive of City Hall, parents were drawn to a small number of neighborhoods that were demographically very similar. Parents also tended to consider mainly areas that were geographically close to their current residence. Thus, building on Sharkey’s notion of “cognitive constraints,” our work points to “mental maps” that parents created of the area which formed the basis of a very speedy decision.

Third, after parents drew on their networks and settled on a neighborhood, they appeared to assess and validate the choice through a consideration of the fit of the area with their taste. Douglas Allen has developed, in another context, the concept of “fits-like-a-glove” or FLAG as a model of consumer choice for post-secondary education (Allen, 2002). We draw on this concept to highlight the ways in which parents appeared to be drawn to neighborhoods which had a familiarity, ease, and comfort. In developing perceptions of possible destinations, the parents spoke not only in cognitive terms, but displayed an embodied ease or comfort with particular communities. As we show below, parents smiled, looked relaxed, and displayed a taken-for-granted assumption that certain areas were highly desirable residential location. There were variations; working-class parents spoke more of the centrality of extended family than did middle-class families in why they found an area comfortable. Even here, however, parents had difficulty providing a detailed, systematic rationale for their residential preferences. The difficulty which normally articulate upper-middle-class parents had in explaining the rationale behind a neighborhood choice also highlighted the “taken-for-granted” nature of their dispositions. Hence, we believe that this residential selection process can be fruitfully conceived of as an empirical example of habitus in which parents are drawn to communities which feel familiar.

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Denton, 1993, and Lubunowitz and Rosenbaum, 2000 on these issues. Although we seek to allude to these “structuring structures,” for the most part they remain outside the discussion in this paper.

Consequently, our data imply that the class- and race-segregative housing decisions made by our research subjects *need* not have been explicitly or thematically motivated by a concern for to avoid particular groups. To the contrary, both the mental maps and the networks which drove the housing search process *already* reflected—each in its own way—the class and racial segregation that characterized the region. It is entirely possible, of course, that some families were explicitly avoiding certain areas. But, our research suggested not only that the families had highly selective knowledge, but they were comfortable with their truncated knowledge. This knowledge guided residential decisions. Since many studies have implicitly suggested a “smoking gun” of overt discrimination, our research (together with that of others) suggests a somewhat different set of mechanisms in the formation of residential preferences.

To be sure there were some exceptions to the process we describe—that is, there were a small number of parents who didn’t simply rely on the word of trusted network contacts or a vaguely delineated sense of which neighborhoods were “desirable.” In particular, some of the middle-class black parents in our sample approached the neighborhood search process more systematically, giving explicit consideration to factors such as demographic composition and school quality, and undertaking various kinds of research intended to facilitate neighborhood comparison. Yet, even these parents only generally considered neighborhoods where they were familiar with the area and they had an informal social connection. Hence, the social worlds of the parents guided them to housing. In many case, the “taken-for-granted” dispositions were crucial. We see our results as offering an empirical example of the power of habitus to shape an important life decision.

## **Literature Review and Conceptual Background**

A vast amount of research has documented the scope of residential segregation in the U.S. and shown how it impacts various ethnic and economic groups. Numerous studies have documented that residential location varies significantly by class and race. Jargowsky (1996), for example, demonstrated the existence of a trend toward greater income segregation among whites, blacks, and Hispanics. More recently, Reardon and Biscoff (2012) have also shown that residential economic segregation has increased over time, which has led to increased economic segregation in public schools. They therefore argue that economic segregation contributes to the social class gap in educational outcomes.

Racial and ethnic residential segregation has, of course, long been a fundamental sociological concern. Massey and Denton’s (1993) widely read book argued compellingly that black-white segregation, in particular, remained an enduring feature of U.S. society. Subsequent work has established that only modest declines in black-white segregation have occurred more recently, despite apparent attitudinal changes and a trend towards income convergence in 1990s (Logan, Stults, and Farley 2004; see also Wilkes and Iceland 2004). A substantial body research has documented the centrality of race to residential preferences, especially for whites. Thus, Crowder and South speak of a general “context of Whites’ aversion to residing near large and diverse minority populations” (2008: p. 16).

To be sure, residential segregation has changed over time. Suburban areas, for example, have become more racially diverse (Logan and Schneider 1984). The simultaneous impact of income

results in relatively complicated patterns. For example, Alba, Logan, and Stults (2000) report that middle-class African-American living in suburbs are substantially less segregated from whites than are poor African-Americans living in central cities; however, the suburban neighborhoods they reside in are far less affluent than those of economically comparable white families. More generally, Sampson and Sharkey have described a residential sorting process that aggregates into a “structural pattern of flows between neighborhoods that generates virtually nonoverlapping income distributions” and little exchange between white and minority neighborhoods (2008, p. 1).

While these patterns are well-documented, relatively little research has been devoted to the process of neighborhood selection. In a classic study, Peter Rossi (1955) examined *Why Families Move*. His work highlights the importance of life-course changes in motivating residential mobility, but gives more limited attention to how families actually select a residential destination. There are, of course, numerous studies of the role of race in residential preferences. In this approach, respondents are typically given cards with different racial distributions of houses in a hypothetical neighborhood and asked to rank them in terms of desirability (Charles, 2006; Clark, 2008, 2009).<sup>3</sup> These studies have been very important. However, they typically solicit opinions only on an imaginary neighborhood. Moreover, they sometimes ask respondents to rank as many as 15 such neighborhoods; as we will argue below, this is not how the search process typically unfolds. Krysan and Bader (2007), however, provide respondents with actual maps of Detroit in order to gauge their knowledge of actual neighborhoods and determine their preferences. Nevertheless, while highly intriguing, it is still not clear that this procedure reflects the actual search process that families undertake when choosing a neighborhood.

Two lines of work, however, have directly focused on the process of neighborhood selection. In Holme’s (2002) study of residential decision-making, middle-class parents were asked how they selected residences (and schools). She found, interestingly, that her subjects relied heavily on word-of-mouth (especially as it pertained to school quality); they did little independent investigation. Nevertheless, this study is now a decade old; moreover, the restricted nature of the sample did not permit a comparison of neighborhood selection strategies across class and race groups.

Beyond this, a series of social experiments providing vouchers to low-income families—the Gautreaux and “Move to Opportunity” projects—have yielded important findings. Studies have indicated that despite the intent of these programs to move families to more affluent neighborhoods, many voucher recipients ultimately chose housing in neighborhoods similar to the low-income ones in which they had originally resided. Others returned to low-income neighborhoods after spending a short time in the suburbs. These results have been explained by factors such as the limited amount of time recipients felt they had when making residential choices and the absence of adequate apartments in some neighborhoods (Rhodes and DeLuca 2012). Researchers have also reported that Gautreaux residents who moved to the suburbs had

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Clark (2009) reports that the following question was asked in the Multi-City Study: “Now I would like you to imagine that you have been looking for a house and have found a nice house you can afford. This house could be located in several different types of neighborhoods as shown on these cards. (*The cards show combinations of 15 own and other races indicated by stylized houses.*) Would you look through the cards and rearrange them so that the neighborhood that is most attractive to you is on top, the next most attractive second, and so on down the line, with the least attractive neighborhood on the bottom?”

more contact with neighbors than did city residents, but they often reported feeling uncomfortable, including with their neighbors (see Clark, 2009; and Lubinowitz and Rosenbaum, 2000).

In addition to the lack of empirical research on how individuals come to frame particular neighborhoods as attractive options, conceptualization of the housing residential process has been excessively narrow. In their desire for careful precision, researchers have often been restricted to studying the role of individual variables in the residential decision process (e.g., income, networks, home ownership, family structure, and so forth). As a result, researchers often conceive of residential decisions in isolation from other dimensions of daily life (e.g., work location, family support system, housing preferences, school decisions, and tastes in restaurants, shops, and communities). Nonetheless, many factors are, in fact, woven together when individuals make housing decision, since a host of services are tied to residential location (e.g., schools, parks, pools, shops, yards, safety, and transportation availability). Moreover, many (and perhaps most) parents view residential decisions as part of a broader project of trying to give their children advantages in life. Yet, the social science literature usually has not reflected the lived experiences of parents as they consider these interwoven factors together. Thus, for example, studies which document the transmission of advantages from parents to children (particularly in sociology of education) have given scant attention to residential decision-making (for a review these studies see, among others, Brint 2006, and Pallas and Jennings, 2009). Indeed, researchers have documented that schools are highly segregated by class and race, that this segregation has an influence both the cultural climate and on educational outcomes (Brantlinger, 2003, Condrón, 2009; Downey et al, 2004, Demerath, 2009, Van Zandt and Wunneburger, 2010). Nevertheless, relatively little attention has been paid to how parents come to arrive at the residential locations which result in segregated schools. Our analysis seeks to examine the social mechanisms through which parents come to prioritize certain neighborhoods and select particular residences.

## **Research Methodology**

This paper is based on in-depth, face-to-face interviews with parents of young children in the city and suburbs of a large Northeastern city. Table 1 describes the core study of upper-middle-class, middle-class, and working class white and African-American native-born parents in 87 families. (Four of the families are interracial; all are white women and African-American men.) Most of the interviews are with mothers, but five are with fathers, and in an additional five families the mother and the father were interviewed together. The families were recruited in a variety of ways. The study was originally designed to focus on parents of children whose eldest child was in kindergarten in three suburban communities. We began by gaining permission to study a very elite school district, which we call “Kingsley,” which is a predominantly white, affluent nearby suburb (Figures 1-5). We then studied the contiguous school district we call “Gibbons,” which is also predominantly white, but less affluent. Our third school district, “Walnut,” is close to Gibbons; it is much less wealthy and much less white. The houses in all three districts, however, are with a thirty-minute drive of City Hall in the central city. With the help of the Superintendents in each district, we selected one elementary school in each district. We sent letters home to parents of children in kindergarten; we also visited the school during events to

recruit parents.<sup>4</sup> We told parents that we were interested in learning how they came to live where they live.

As we explain below, however, the interviews with parents were very vague with respect to the key issues we were interested in. Since many parents had bought their houses two or three years earlier, we wondered if the quality of the description would improve if we interviewed parents who had bought a house more recently. As a result, we broadened the sample's scope to include children in daycare. We used a snowball sample for parents. Although the majority of the families in the study had an eldest child who was three to six years of age, in order to find families through the snowball sample we included some families whose eldest child was as old as ten. We also ultimately included an urban sample of parents. These parents were drawn primarily from daycares, and the subsequent snowball sample, but a few, particularly the upper-middle-class African-American parents, were found by activating the social networks of the researchers. (We did not, however, interview anyone we knew or would cross paths with in our work or social life.) We sought to have a minimum of four to five families per "cell" of the sample. Although the number of white and African-American parents are roughly comparable, the study is imbalanced. We have relatively few white working-class families; we have more working-class African-American families than elite families. This imbalance is a weakness in the study. Still, the study includes 22 middle-class African-American families. In addition, as we describe, we did not find significant differences by class (and to a lesser extent race) in how parents went about selecting a neighborhood. The first author carried out 50 of the 88 interviews; the remaining interviews were conducted by a racially diverse group of doctoral students. The second author conducted one interview. We gave the families an honorarium of \$50 for the interview. In addition, as a friendly gesture, we brought a pie or other dessert to the interview.

In designing the sample, we defined social class in terms of the educational requirements of respondents' jobs and the amount of autonomy they experienced in them. The upper middle-class includes families in which at least one adult has a full-time job that requires highly complex, educationally certified (i.e. post-baccalaureate) skills and also entails substantial autonomy (i.e. freedom from direct supervision) in the course of his or her work. The middle-class includes families in which no adult meets these criteria, but at least one is employed in a full-time job that requires relatively complex, educationally certified skills (i.e. a bachelor's degree or above); however, the job need not entail high levels of autonomy. (Thus, our sample folds a small number of families in which one parent has a master's degree into the "middle-class" category, on the grounds that he or she is closely supervised. Their occupations included social worker and insurance claims evaluator.) Working families are those in which no adult has a job requiring complex, educationally certified skills.

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<sup>4</sup> We also told parents we were interested in how they ended up sending their children to this school. As working parents with small children, many parents had trouble finding 90 minutes to 2 hours for an interview. They were simply too busy. We found that many parents suggested that we email them; they did not respond, however, to the email. As a result, we found that the best way to recruit was face-to-face or by having someone ask another parent if they were willing to be contacted by us; if the parents agreed to consider the request, we asked for their email *and* phone number. Since many parents were suggested to us that we did not interview, it is difficult to calculate a response rate. Almost all of the interviews took place in the home of the parent. We found that parents frequently suggested meeting in a coffee shop. Due to the need to protect the sound quality in the tape recording, however, we sought to have the interviews be in the home or, rarely, in an office or other private setting.

In addition to the core sample, we also carried out a number of “satellite studies,” including interviews with 30 middle-class and upper-middle-class white city parents, 30 Kingsley suburban parents active in the PTA at the elementary school, and 15 immigrant and native-born renters in Kingsley and another elite public school district. Although not the focus of this paper, the patterns we report here also surfaced in these satellite studies. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. After looking for themes in the interviews, the authors devised a coding scheme. The interviews from the core sample were then coded by research assistants using Atlas.ti.<sup>5</sup>

## **The Context**

The metropolitan area in which we did the study has around three million residents; slightly less than one-half of residents are African-American, non-Hispanic whites make up approximately 40% of the population, and the remainder are a combination of Asians, Hispanics, and other racial and ethnic groups. By contrast, the suburbs are predominantly white, although some inner-ring, older suburbs have become overwhelmingly minority in recent years. Indeed, the suburbs which ring the city vary significantly in terms of their social and demographic characteristics. There are over 40 school districts in the area that could potentially be considered as being in commuting distance of the central city. As noted, we selected three of these as sites for the study.

Kingsley is often referred to as the “Garden Area” and has a reputation as being particularly affluent. Housing in Kingsley varies from small, brick row homes to massive mansions with broad expanses of gardens, hills, and carefully trimmed yards. The median home value exceeds \$450,000. There is a central corridor with boutique stores as well as grocery stores, restaurants, shopping malls, and chain stores such as Office Depot, Bed Bath and Beyond, and a national fitness chain. The townships in the Kingsley School District are part of an elaborate park system with two pools with modest entry fees for residents that include a water slide, a space for picnics, and life guards. There is also an extensive library system. Many residents are employed in professional occupations such as medicine, law, academia, and finance. Most census tracts in the district are approximately 95% white, although one is over 50% African-American (and 10% Hispanic); it generally contains smaller, less expensive homes. (Historically, it was where the servants of the wealthy residents lived.) The schools in Kingsley are widely reputed to be some of the best in the state. The district spends approximately \$25,000 per student annually, and at the elementary school where we recruited families, third grade reading and math proficiency rates were over 90%.

Gibbons is widely described as a more “middle class” area and is heavily Catholic. It has smaller, ranch homes with smaller plots of land than Kingsley. The median home value is still considerable, at over \$300,000. The business district consists primarily of strip malls. The area has few boutique stores, but there are numerous grocery stores as well as other shops. The schools in Gibbons do not have the wide ranging reputation of those in Kingsley, but are generally viewed positively. The district spends approximately \$15,000 per pupil. Like Kingsley, third grade proficiency rates at the school where we recruited families were over 90%.

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<sup>5</sup> In our quotations, to improve clarity, we have eliminated stutters, false starts, repetitions of words, “like,” “you know,” “um” and other utterances when they do not shift the meaning. In a few instances, we have altered the order of sentences to improve readability.

Warren is a larger school district; it is also more heterogeneous than Kingsley or Gibbons. Some sections of the district are made up of tree-lined streets containing single-family homes with neatly manicured yards, others are very similar to, indeed indistinguishable from, poor neighborhoods in the central city. A few small shopping districts offer residents diners, insurance brokerages, and convenience stores; others present residents with discount retail stores, check cashing operations, and corner stores. The median home value in Warren is approximately \$150,000. A real estate broker told us that many of the more affluent residents in the district send their children to private schools. This is consistent with the fact that in the elementary school where we recruited families, roughly 90% of children were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The district spends approximately \$14,000 per pupil per year, and third grade proficiency rates at the school where we recruited were approximately 40%.

Finally, the central city itself has several million residents. African Americans and whites are the largest racial/ethnic groups, although the city has a substantial number of Hispanic residents and a smaller number of Asians. The poverty rate exceeds 20%. There are approximately equal number of renters and home owners. The city contains numerous neighborhoods with relatively distinct identities; these neighborhoods are heavily segregated, both economically and by race. The urban school district has over 150 elementary schools, as well an increasing number of charters. Parents who can afford them also have numerous private school options. The district spends approximately \$13,000 per pupil per year. The district has a choice policy that permits parents to apply to out-of-catchment public schools if they do not want their children to attend the neighborhood school. In a recent year, more than half of the district's public schools did not make Adequate Yearly Progress.

## **Findings**

### *Guided by Networks*

Social networks were a crucial element in the process of how parents decided where to live. Indeed, in almost all of the interviews, parents discussed learning of neighborhood options from people in their networks: co-workers, immediate family, extended family, and friends. This was particularly clear with parents who moved to the area with no prior knowledge of it.

For example, Ms. Leslie Neil, a talkative, bouncy, white, middle-class woman in a dressy suit, heels, and fashionable necklace, plops down on the couch to talk to me one late afternoon as her six-year old and three-year old sons run around outside. She works in a managerial health care role; her husband, a financial manager, frequently travels all week for his work. Their combined income is around \$225,000. They live in a small, two-story home with a massive backyard in Gibbons which they bought for \$425,000 in 2007 ("at the height of the market") in a neighborhood which has bubbly rides, summer block parties, and ice cream socials. They moved there because her future boss recommended it:

I kind of threw my resume out because Tim was commuting so much and I got the call from my boss who's very much like 'when can you start.' I finished work in Cleveland like on April second or third and started here April ninth. So we flew in in February. So my boss mentioned that there was somebody moving because the family here had a child with special needs and they were moving;... they needed to be closer to family. We didn't really look a whole lot, but we kind of look back on the whole moment and say like it was so meant to be.

Her husband drove around one day with an agent:

he had kind of looked around with an agent;...they looked in Kingsley – [three different communities] this kind of whole area because he definitely felt like he thought it would be good to live in this area and I said as long as it's an easy train ride, and that's what my boss kept saying anything is any easy train ride.

But they immediately looked at the house her boss recommended:

and we, he looked around a little bit and then when I came here, we literally only looked in this neighborhood, um, which is why sometimes when we have something go wrong with the house, he'll say, 'Oh, we should have looked a little bit more.'

If she were to do it again she reports, "I probably would have done more investigation."

But, honestly I never really went on and did like what I probably would do now if I were moving and have more of a --- how they always do the *City Magazine* even though it's like not always scientific, but like the top school districts in the area as far as like what they are. I probably would have done more investigation. And even with my sister in Ohio, I've kind of gone by like they're in the area that we would have looked, top, like one of the top Blue Ribbon schools in the area and it's a public school. I said I wish we kind of were in a neighborhood that could boast that that's where we're top with that, but I don't feel like that's absolutely necessary.

Hence, her decision was guided primarily by her informal networks.

Other parents, even those who had a less rushed process, described similarly trusting who they knew. Their friends, family, and co-workers recommended neighborhoods; the families then looked in those areas. For example, a white middle-class couple had been living in a small, one-bedroom apartment in the city near the husband's work; due to the impending birth of their first child, they needed to move as Joanna Stewart explains:

I was pregnant with Charlie and, you know, he was about to be born and our lease expired in February and we're like either we go for another year or we have to find a place, I mean, what are we going to do? And a coworker of my husband actually lives in Kingsley just around the block and he's like, 'Oh, you should come to Kingsley. It's a beautiful neighborhood, Kingsley schools, and it's just great.'

The wife was dubious at first in part because it was out of the city:

I was like 'I know you're not going to like it, what are you talking about?. I don't want to—'Like I'm totally not familiar, I've never been here. So we came actually a couple days before I gave birth.... It [the area] looked alright.

The third house they saw was a very small (i.e., less than 1,000 square foot house) fixer-upper for \$185,000 in 2008:

I mean, I'm not like sold on it [the area] but, you know, it looks nice. And then the baby was born in December and we came back with a realtor and actually that's the third house we saw. it was an older gentleman lived here so it was, it needed a lot of TLC like, you know, paint and things like that, but I saw potential and we put our bid on it and we, you know, they gave us asking price. We're like, "Okay!"

Some respondents grew up in a different part of the metropolitan area; they visited friends from high school who moved to Gibbons. For example, Bernice Hathaway, a married white school teacher with a four-year old son, grew up in a poor neighborhood (which, during the interview, she tearfully recounted as feeling scary and unsafe). She and her husband purchased their three-bedroom home for \$200,000. She learned about Gibbons from their network:

Some of the girls I was friendly with from my high school, you know, I'd visit their homes and I thought their areas were beautiful. I never really knew the area as much as I thought I did but I remember like, you know, coming, driving through when we were, you know, visiting and whatnot and, and seeing that it was nice. Just from talking to people.

For other parents who had grown up in the area, networks mattered in a different way: they framed the choices parents considered, since the respondents in our study generally wanted to live near family. Denise Thompson, a quiet, serious, middle-class black single mother, chose to buy a house in the working-class African-American city neighborhood where she grew up. She purchased her small, three bedroom, one bath rowhouse for \$136,000 just before her son was born, six years before the interview:

I was comfortable of course again with the area 'cause I grew up in this area. I went to that school, so I wanted to stay where I was comfortable. It's also close to my family. My mother's like a block this way. My sister is a couple blocks another way. And I have another sister five minutes from here, so I knew I needed that support so I would be, you know, with my family and I could get that support. So, you know, I found this house and, you know, it's nice 'cause I can kind of keep an eye on him, you know, when he's running around. I don't have to go searching from different rooms. The house is small enough—that I can find him. So it's good.

In some cases, new families moving to the area were given a realtor by the new employers; the information came from the colleagues and the realtor. For example, Bethany Thorson, a white, slim, earnest middle-class mother had moved to Kingsley when her daughter was one; her husband, a physician, had been offered a position in the medical school at a local prestigious university. At the time of the study, her daughter was now 11; the younger daughter was 8. Although she had a Master's degree in Finance and had worked over 50 hours per week in upper-level management supervising the operations department, she was currently at stay-at-home mother. She considered her active volunteering to be her job. When they moved, they did not have any ties to anyone in the area. The university referred them to a realtor:

And we didn't—we were not familiar with the area at all. But we knew that he didn't want to drive far to work, as close of a commute as possible. And um, we knew that Kingsley school district was a very good school district, and we are both very strong believers in public schools. So... that lead us to Kingsley.

And then, we looked around all of Kingsley. And not having any knowledge about the various schools or the various neighborhoods, we basically trusted our realtor to show us all around.

All of their information about the quality of the school district came from the (weak) networks ties they were forming: the colleagues who took them out to dinner and the realtor recommended by people in his department.

**Q:** And you said that you had heard that the Kingsley school districts were good. Do you remember how you heard that, or who told you?

**A:** We heard it from the realtor of course. We heard it from colleague's of my husband's that he was going to work with. We had met, and we had gone out for dinner, and they wine and dined us, of course. And we heard all about, you know, where young people were living and where there were kids in the neighborhoods and the schools that were good. It's a very big private school area also. But because we wanted public school we knew that Kingsley... If we, I mean, we also looked at houses in [nearby, elite, school district]. But it put us a little further out.

Schools were not a large consideration in the move, she reported, although she asked some questions of the realtor:

So our daughter was only one, you know we weren't really thinking about elementary school at that point. However, we did—I did ask the realtor, you know, what about this school, and what's the population, and that sort of thing

Hence, Ms. Thordson's information gathering was restricted to the information she received from informal networks. In only one instance did one family "cold call" upon a neighborhood based on internet data; this family was moving from out-of-state, did not have friends or family in the area, and the physician coming for a residency chose not to ask his co-workers.

In only one instance did a family "cold call" upon a neighborhood based on internet data; this family was moving from out-of-state, did not have friends or family in the area, and not to seek advice from co-workers.

For some parents, and particularly single-parents, being near family was essential. These parents only considered residences that were close to their relatives. For example, Ms. Thompson, an African-American middle-class single mother working as a low-level manager at a health insurance company, had grown up in a two-parent working-class home in the city; she had graduated from a local Catholic college. She earned between \$60,000 and \$70,000 annually. Her son's father, who was a high school graduate, worked in a local factory, earning around \$30,000 to \$35,000 per year. All of Ms. Thompson's family lived within a few blocks of the area where she had grown up. This determined where she looked to purchase a home:

I wanted to stay where I was comfortable. It's also close to my family. My mother's like a block this way. My sister is a couple blocks another way. And I have another sister five minutes from here, so I knew I needed that support so I would be with my family and I could get that support. So, you know, I found this house.

Another upper-middle-class African-American mother of three children echoed this view. Elana Elliot, a tall, heavy-set, single-mother with a booming voice and a robust sense of humor owned a row house in a black middle-class area in the edge of the city; she rejected Terryville, a suburban community five minutes further out:

Terryville, ,, didn't really think about it. Because, my mother lives, you know, right in Trestle,, my aunt, my mother's sister also lives in Trestle,, so I knew that I had to be close to them. I definitely would not consider moving too far away from my family. So, I felt like Terryville took me out of the way.

Her family provided important resources. She smiles as she recounts the benefits:

...easy access to babysitting. (chuckles) Easy access to babysitting, oh, and, uh, the kids, um, their father, their father's parents....they live right in the vicinity as well, so everything is just, uh, one stop.

If I needed to call them, if I needed to call them and, you know, say, `oh, can I drop the kids off, I need to go shopping----or can you come over. Everything's just a hop, skip and a jump., so my mom, you know, anytime like if I need to go to the store or, um, anything, she's right, she's five minutes, ten minutes away, my aunt's ten minutes away.

An upper-middle-class white professional father, Mr. Vilmer, sharing custody of his four-year old daughter, echoed this view.

I can work my schedule so that I could pick her up whenever, or my mom lives 15 minutes from here so if need be, my mom could pick her up.

Particularly for single- parents, family support was essential. But two-parent families with dual careers also reported the value of having family nearby. In many, but not all, instances, the location of family played into residential decisions. Still, given the relatively compact nature of the geography (compared to, say, Los Angeles), the families in the study still had a choice of neighborhoods within a fifteen minute drive of a location. Often parents did not examine closer neighborhoods; for some Kingsley parents, for example, Gibbons was closer to their family and their work. Thus, distance was only one part of the equation; the sensibility of what parents considered to be appropriate also mattered.

### **Settling on a Neighborhood: Vague Knowledge, Rapid Decisions**

Most parents, however, were surprisingly vague in describing how they came to make one of the most economically consequential decisions of their lives: deciding upon the neighborhood for the purchase of the home or the rental of a home. Parents who provided deeply vivid accounts of many aspects of their lives were relatively incoherent in articulating the rationale behind the choice of their neighborhood. We were led to conclude that rather than approaching a neighborhood choice in a systematic, comparative fashion, our respondents often had "mental maps" guiding their orientation to the region. These maps did not highlight contrasting kinds of areas; instead they were composed of comparable neighborhoods with residents of a similar race and class to the respondents (i.e., people like them). Most neighborhoods were never considered. The mental maps, truncated as they were, did not simply surface in the minds of parents in our study. Instead, it appeared that they were formed based on the life experience of the individuals and, additionally, the influence of family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances.

For example, a white mother, Madeline Peterson, a research scientist with a doctorate, married to another scientist and with a boy in kindergarten, described a vague process in which they gathered little information, made a rapid decision, and looked at few options before purchasing a home in Kingsley. The family's one-story modern house (purchased for \$360,00) had a sweeping

array of windows looking out on a large, pastoral backyard. Ms. Peterson has a thoughtful, quiet, somber air about her. On a Saturday morning, the house was immaculate and completely quiet. They had moved from an urban, Midwestern city; they wanted a larger yard which would “hold a sandbox,” but they were otherwise vague. Smiling ruefully, she looks somewhat sheepish about her inability to provide a crisp response:

AL: When you were thinking about moving here..., how did you hear about, where did you consider moving?

So I was thinking about that, I was thinking if I really know the answers to these questions (laughs), because it's not that crystal clear. I suppose it isn't crystal clear for lots of people.

We wanted to be somewhere where there were good public schools, and we wanted some space, and we wanted to minimize our commute. And so that gave us a radius. And we looked, very half-heartedly across the river, and it wasn't anything about schools there, we didn't get that far, in logic we didn't want to have a bridge between us and work, (laughs), so, um, so that brought us to this general area, and we needed to be near a train line, because we wanted to have a one-car family, so that narrowed it down for us.

As they looked for the house, schools were not a key part of the decision:

So none of this had anything to do school, and one of the things that school didn't come into it quite that early is my sense, partially from talking to other people was that most of the schools here, public schools here were very acceptable. Um, so, so we looked. And, and if the school, and I know you're not asking me that at this point, but if the schools came into it, it may have been sort of Southern County, Madison County, but even then when I look back, I don't think my information to say that the Southern County schools were better than the Madison County schools was particularly solid. You know, I'm a scientist, I know how to check things out, and the fact is I really didn't do it.

Indeed, she and her husband took the train to work. Living in Kingsley meant that they needed to take the train to the main train station, take a slow shuttle bus, and then walk a couple of blocks. If they had gone to another district quite similar to Kingsley in the South called Bridgeway, they could have shaved 15 to 20 minutes off of their commute time:

AL: Did you consider Bridgeway?

In retrospect, we should have. It would have made a lot of sense, because actually the connection would have been more convenient to us, because it would have taken us out right at work instead of at the train station and the shuttle bus. I knew that that was also a very nice neighborhood, and I had no reason to think that the schools there were an issue. I think really what happened is our friends lived in this neighborhood, and we knew this neighborhood best from visiting them. My sister had lived for a long time in (a town near their current home), so we knew this area, somehow deep in our brains from decades ago. So we didn't really look very hard in Bridgeway and then I think had the real estate agent shown us homes in Bridgeway, we would have looked at them happily, but she didn't because this was her stomping grounds, too.

The mother and her husband, it bears repeating, were trained researchers.. Nevertheless, as with many of the parents we interviewed, the process she described was casual, vague, and somewhat haphazard, and relied heavily on the knowledge they gained from informal networks.

Other parents' accounts echoed this. The mother of a child in kindergarten, a high-level professional, also white and upper-middle-class, had returned from Europe after separating from her husband. In selecting where to live, she described being drawn to the city, but then selecting Medford (a community in Kingsley) as a better option. Her \$4000,000 home is close to extended kin; it all seemed to be a perfect fit to her:

I grew up in the suburbs of [the city] and my family all live in various parts of [the city] not far from here. I was coming back as a single mother with a toddler who my family were very excited to see and I wanted to be near where they were. I thought about living in the city. Initially I kind of was, I, I like cities and I wanted to move downtown, but the more I thought about it, it made more sense with a child to be somewhere a little less urban. Medford to me was just the right combination of having a little shopping district where there's a train station and all the shops are there and you walk to it from home, and so I liked that feel. And then it also had a great playground and school system too—which attracted me to this area. And then it was about five or ten minutes away from various relatives.

Hence, this mother, in a similar fashion to Ms. Peterson, relied on her informal knowledge based on her familiarity with the region and the location of her family. Although someone who did research as part of her occupation, she did not examine a wide array of options; she considered essentially the city and Medford which is very close to where she grew up.

Many of the parents in our study had grown up in the region. They drew on their knowledge and the knowledge of their relatives:

My husband is from the region, but not from this area [neighborhood]. He's from [a town 25 minutes away], and so, um, but he hadn't really been back to the area for a long time. And when we moved back, when we moved here, I think we just knew, we just knew that the two best school districts in the state were actually [Trotter -- the one he grew up in] and Kingsley, and at the time, um, he had a job that was [on the edge of Kingsley] and I worked in [15 minutes from Kingsley but 45 minutes from Trotter], and so, we just felt that, um, you know, being in Kingsley would, would work out, would be, you know, better than the Trotter area.

Like many of the parents we spoke with, this woman and her husband “just knew” the options. She also did additional research on the internet. As with many families, however, this research was to confirm the decision that they had made.

In short, many families moved rapidly to a decision based on information given to them by their informal networks or through visits to the intended community. They considered few options, even options that rationally made more sense given their work location. In interviews parents were very vague. Few could identify, for example, who had told them that Kingsley was a strong school district. Instead, it was widely-shared taken-for-granted knowledge. This lack of clarity

does not seem to be tied to the retrospective nature of the interviews. Parents could provide extensive detail on the original color of the walls of their house, the kinds of remodeling they did, the price of the house, and the number of trips they made to find a home. But they could not articulate, in a detailed fashion, how they had chosen the neighborhood in which they lived.

In addition, as Krysan and Bader (2009) have shown, parents also had many “blind spots,” in the sense there were many communities which they had never heard of or considered as options. For example, although Kingsley and Gibbons shared a border, Kingsley was widely seen as “one of the best” school districts in the state. Gibbons, despite having elementary school test scores that were as high as Kingsley’s, was not a district which was well known. A number of parents had never heard of it. Moreover, most Kingsley parents had never heard of Warren school district although it was 20 minutes away. They had, however, heard of Bridgeway, a relatively elite suburban district 25 minutes away. And, conversely, Warren parents had very limited awareness of Gibbons or Kingsley.

Given the vague, rather than systematic, character of the housing search, mistakes were common. Some parents moved in only to learn that their children were assigned to a different school than the one they had expected. Others were surprised to learn that kindergarten was half-day rather than full day. Other parents were shocked to learn that there were no children in the neighborhood. Take, for example, the King family, an African-American middle-class family with a seven-year old girl, who lived in an older, racial diverse suburb of Durham, which was on the north border of the city. They both worked in the banking administration in a community called Hollister, about one hour north of the city. Their search process was similar to many:

I didn’t want be in the city and I didn’t want to be as far out as Hollister [where I worked] because at the time we were still very young and we would like be downtown, so we knew we wanted to come a little bit closer. This particular neighborhood, we liked the diversity of the neighborhood.

But, they discovered a serious problem; there were no other children in the neighborhood to play with her daughter. Furrowing her brows, and her voice rising in anxiety, Ms. King appeared to be distressed as she reported this problem:

At the time, we didn’t realize, I don’t know how we didn’t realize it, but everybody’s older and so there’s no kids here that are my daughter’s age.... So my daughter, she can’t really like go outside and find a friend to play with because there’s no kids that are her age as there are not very many homeowners around here that are our age either. And so in hindsight, I probably would have given that more thought, but I didn’t. Also in this area, again in hindsight, the school taxes are extremely high, extremely high. I would have given that some additional thought as well when we moved here.

We found almost no parents in our study that inadvertently ended up moving into a district which was a distinctly different social class configuration than their own position.

Most upper-middle-class and lower-middle class parents simply never considered area with large numbers of poor families. Overwhelmingly, it didn’t come up. Conversely, working-class parents “felt comfortable” living near family and where they had grown up; they did not consider

more elite communities. A number of parents had a passionate desire to avoid the city, but since there were over 105 school districts within a one-hour drive of city hall, there were theoretically many different neighborhoods parents could consider. Since the school districts were economically heterogeneous, the failure to consider many neighborhoods was not simply linked to the cost of housing.

In sum, although research on neighborhood choice routinely offers a comparison of alternative communities, we did not find evidence that parents systematically compared and contrasted seven, ten, or fifteen possible communities. Instead, parents had “mental maps” which provided a highly truncated vision of the region. Most parents only had a handful of communities in mind. The rest were “greyed out” in the mental vision of the region.

## Variations

The processes that we describe—including the network driven formation of the neighborhood choice set and a decision-making process that was rapid and relied on vague knowledge—were apparent throughout the sample. That is, regardless of race, class background, or community type, we observed significant numbers of families whose neighborhood selection unfolded in this manner. That said, a degree of variability was apparent within the sample. This was most apparent among members of the black middle-class, where we observed a number of cases in which families did more research and systematic comparison than most of the white middle-class families in our (small) sample.

For example, the Taylor family, an African-American middle-class family with two sons aged eight and nine, had recently moved into a rental home in Kingsley. Mr. Taylor is an unusually jovial, sociable fellow; he chuckles frequently -- ridiculing himself --- even when discussing painful matters (“I fancied myself a real estate investor at the end of the real estate boom, so I bought high and lost my shirt.”) Mr. Taylor earned a bachelor’s degree in Communications at a historically black college; his wife has three years of college from a state college in the south. Although their income from a family-run nursing home was over \$200,000, they were recovering from an economic setback. Mr. Taylor ruefully said, “I fancied myself a real estate investor at the end of the real estate boom, so I bought [four properties] high and lost my shirt. And which the money wasn’t a big thing. It was the credit that I had to forgo.” Rather than pay an exorbitant interest rate, or be declined for a loan, he requested a five-year lease.

The Taylors previously lived in a “gentrifying area” in the central city, where they rented a home. They were fond of their neighborhood, which they describe as having “just a little bit more energy” than their current suburban location. Although they had some safety concerns for their children, the decision to leave the city was precipitated mainly by friction with the administrators at the private school the children attended. Thus, the process of residential mobility was strongly tied to concerns about schools. Describing the friction with the private school, Mr. Taylor recounted:

I said to my wife, ‘we’re paying for something. It shouldn’t be this aggravating. This is not the only school in the world.’ And I just started to research a lot about school districts. [I] grew up in [the city]. I knew that Kingsley had a pretty good school district. I didn’t realize how good it was until I started to research, looking

at the testing, looking at the schools [i.e. colleges] that their students had matriculated to.

Although impressed by Kingsley, Mr. Taylor nonetheless undertook an unusually energetic and systematic comparison with two other high performing school systems in the region:

Webster I believe we considered and Spencer. I didn't like the housing I saw available for the money I [would have been] paying there and I looked at some of the test scores of the African American children, and I didn't feel like the test scores were high enough.... Those were the three districts we looked at and when I was kind of comparing them, this one kind of came out ahead. The test scores here were higher in general. The kids here were performing at a high, high level. And then I looked at the high schools, the tools they had. You know, the robotics program..., the drama program..., all the extracurricular activities and the foreign language program that they have at these schools impressed me, and although some of the other districts had some of that, they didn't have it all in one-stop shopping. And then the proximity to downtown Philadelphia is like a win, win, win, win, all these wins out here.

This was an unusually detailed search. Once Mr. Taylor and his wife had settled on Kingsley, he carried out further research on the demographic composition of the district's elementary schools. He and his wife decided to search for housing within the catchment areas of the two schools with the greatest diversity. Ultimately, they found a house to rent within one of these attendance zones, for which they pay \$3,000 per month. The street has many children on it; he estimates that it is about 3% African-American on the block; in an ideal world he would like the neighborhood, and his sons' schools, to be 20% minority, but, he notes, "I kind of get along with all kinds of people." Smiling broadly, Mr. Taylor said was pleased with the school: "We're having a great experience and I think he's [his eldest son]...seems to be extremely happy."

Other middle-class and upper middle-class black families provided accounts of a residential search process which assiduously considered test scores. For example, Noelle Miller, a middle class black woman with twins who worked as a school counselor in the city system, reported, "I didn't do too much verbal research inasmuch as I don't really care what people personally think about because I feel it's my duty to know it for myself." She and her husband actively considered—and looked at homes in—five school districts. As with the Taylors, considerations of school quality were the primary criterion. Her husband is an executive in a highly respected non-profit; she took the lead on the research. She took the lead:

I told him I wanted to sell the house and he was like okay. I did, well, I came to him with a specific plan and he, he has to have plans and every, everything has to be laid out and he has to have reasons and you gotta, gotta give like a presentation, so—(chuckles) Um, so— a PowerPoint presentation. I literally had to have a PowerPoint presentation  
They settled in a Suburban community of Webster (about 25 minutes south of Kingsley):

Q: So why was Webster your first choice?

A: The test scores, the graduation rate, the college going rate, the competitiveness of the school district. That was pretty much it.

Q: I see. And, people gather information in different ways. Some people talk to people. Some people look the website. How was it for you?

A: I looked on the website. I went on their website. I got the community newsletter that had all the graduation information. I looked on the state website. I looked everywhere to research...you know, Greatschools.org, all kinds of different websites just to compare and contrast school districts that would be in this area.

Still, despite this careful research, Ms. Noelle ended up locating in an elite school district, comparable to Kingsley in test scores and housing prices, but which had a longer commute to her work (by about twenty-minutes round-trip each day) than Kingsley would have been. She did not have friends or relatives in Kingsley; she also was currently in Cook county; this rootedness guided her search as she describes in a halting fashion:

Q: So did you consider Kingsley?

A: Um, I did not because I, it, it just wasn't an area I, that, that I focused on moving 'cause I already lived in Cook County so I just kind of stayed looking over here.

Thus, although Ms. Noelle did a detailed search, she focused on districts where she had personal knowledge or knowledge from her network; her choice set was constrained.

The working-class families in the sample—black and white—were also distinctive, insofar as the kinship-based networks that exerted significant effect over the search process. Indeed, many of working-class parents we spoke to were pulled into the orbit of their own parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins after moving away from home for a period of time. This is the case with Ms. Edgerton, an African American single mother of a five year old daughter, Taisha, who lives in Warren, a predominantly working-class suburb. She is presently unemployed, having recently been laid off from her job at a loan collection agency, where she earned roughly \$1400 per month before taxes. She is currently using receiving unemployment, which she uses along with savings, child support she receives from her daughter's paternal grandmother, and money that her own mother provides to pay rent and expenses.

After Ms. Edgerton finished high school, she and her partner moved out of state to be near his family. While she was there, her daughter was born. Although her mother came to stay with the couple for a month after the birth, Ms. Edgerton reported that she was deeply upset that her family couldn't be with her when her daughter was born. Shortly afterwards, her boyfriend became involved with another woman, and Ms. Edgerton decided to leave him. There was never any question that she would move back to her old neighborhood:

We're right here on Vine Street right now. My uncle lives right over this bridge. He has a duplex. My cousin lives downstairs from him.... On Main Street, my aunt has a store right next to the Shell station. My uncle owns that building right next door so I have a cousin family in that complex. It is just literally every other block, we have family all around (laugh).... No choice.... We came back when she [Taisha] was six months old. Went back to the area. Went to school in this area and everything. You could try to go away, but it's just so close in it. Literally everybody knows [you], from the crossing guards to the police officer. You know everyone... It's safe. In a bigger town, you don't who're around.

Ms. Edgerton took considerable pleasure in the fact that Taisha will attend her former school, where some of the same teachers still work. The importance of family in guiding residential searches dominated working-class interviews (for both black and white families). Middle-class parents almost always mentioned family, but it was embedded in a much wider array of considerations; unless the mother was a single-parent, it did not dominate the discussion. Middle-class single parents, however, also emphasized the crucial need to live close to their mothers and other relatives.

### **Culture, taste, and fit**

In addition to the role of networks and mental maps in residential sorting, we were also struck by the role of cultural preferences and taste in swirling in and through the accounts of parents on the topic. Douglas Allen, in a different context, has written about “Fits-like-a-glove” (FLAG) for consumer choice (2002). His work highlights the complex role that cultural taste can play in consumer choice as well as the “embodied, holistic” perception which accompanies the “perfect-fit” approach. Our respondents also spoke of these cultural preferences in why they were drawn to different neighborhoods. For example, Ms. Kaitlyn Immel had bought her home six years earlier when she was single. Now married with a four-year-old son, she loved the neighborhood. Since she knew that she wanted to have children, she didn’t want to buy in the city since, at 32, “I knew I would be settling down,” but restaurants, First Fridays, and public transportation were all “huge” for her:

I mean, well, location, location, location literally. Like I, I work in the city, I enjoy the city life, I wanted to be able to hop on a train if I needed to, um, I wanted to be able to go out to a nice restaurant if I wanted to... where I'd want to settle down and mostly neighborhood and environment, feeling like I still had options to do things at nighttime and during the daytime, have some sense of culture... , Kingsley has First Fridays, so there's artwork. You know, I could walk to a decent restaurant. I could meet a friend for a drink.

Others mentioned the importance of trees, and the “feel” of the area. For example, Tamala Bryant, tall, exuberant African-American a single-mother of a four-year old girl, grew up in the West side of the city, but ultimately settled to rent the Northwest:

I looked at a few, 'cause I had really loved, I really loved sort of the [Northwest part of the city] kind of area, like I really love this area. I have always loved the trees and all, so I focused primarily on this area and I love the school, the schools in the area seemed really nice as well. , and I wanted to make sure wherever we went we didn't need to rely on having a car because I knew I didn't want to buy a car anytime soon. So, so those were kind of some of the key things, you know, really looking at proximity to work, proximity to good schools, transportation, this green, leafy, quiet area.

In some instances, people were priced out of an area in which they wanted to live. Elana Elliot, for example, grew up with working-class parents in the Northwest. Her mother was a homemaker until she was 8, and then worked as a sales representative and ultimately got her associates degree; her step father worked in a manufacturing plant. She wanted to live in the Northwest, but she was “priced out” and bought a home for \$110,000 in the a nearby city area.

Q: And did you consider the Northwest?

A: Yes. That was my first choice. But, I couldn't afford a house in the Northwest at the time. So this was the next best thing (chuckles)

Here she stresses the absence of signs of social dysfunction highlighted by Sampson and other scholars:

The fact that it was, um, not oversaturated with like beer stores and corner stores. That was very important to me. there are multiple playgrounds in the area. Um, we have a backyard, front yard. There are a lot of multiple libraries in the area. Um, and it's fairly, um, you know, it's all, it's a working, um, class neighborhood, so..... because that was how, where I, how I grew up.

She also appreciated the opportunities for her children:

There's hardly any crime in this area. Very child friendly, the children, they play, you know, outside, lots of kids on the street. They play in the back, in the driveway, ride their bikes. Hardly, cars hardly EVER come up and down. Even the next block over, there are a lot of children that are age, the same age as my son. They, they'll come over in the driveway and they all meet up in the driveway and play basketball and ride their bikes and everything.

For some families, the cultural amenities were a considerable draw, but then were overruled by other factors. For example, the Palmer family seriously considered, but ultimately rejected, moving to Kingsley. They moved to the city, around the corner from the paternal grandparents, and sent their five-year old son to private school. Although Kingsley had attractive elements, it also didn't feel comfortable to this white, somewhat artistic, middle-class couple. As the mother reported, she was deeply ambivalent. She was attracted to the cultural amenities, but she also didn't feel as if she preferred the city:

We both felt that it was just very white. And to us that was—I mean, we didn't, I don't, we didn't, it wasn't like oh, we want to live, it was just like eventually we're like what's wrong with us? Why can't we get to this decision? Why can't we move to Kingsley? What is stopping us? And then, I think that we both realized that that was part of the decision-making process. Um, but we, we feel very comfortable there, I mean, I love it. Have you been to the wine store there? It's one of the stores in the city. They have the best toy store. They have a really good Japanese supermarket with really good food. I mean, it's, it's a great place. We went to the little gym, that was the other thing, so going to the little gym in Kingsley versus in the city, you get a completely different experience.

Q: Tell me about that. How does the experience differ?

A: You get, you're not sure whether you're talking to the nanny or the mother in Kingsley, and it's almost exclusively white, and you know, the clothes are different, the jewelry's different, the makeup's different, you know. I felt, I, I didn't, I didn't realize, but I was dressing differently (chuckles) to go to this place, and I'm like, what's wrong with me?

Thus, in many families cultural taste was a crucial factor in the housing decision process. Parents

considered cultural fit and cultural amenities. Although it was difficult to untangle exactly when and where these cultural preferences came into play, our impression was that the parents considered them by driving around and walking around the area (rather than before they arrived). Still, for some families, these factors seemed to be an important part of the residential selection process.

## **Discussion**

There is little doubt that the United States is characterized by very high levels of segregation by race and social class. Indeed, while black-white segregation has decreased slightly in recent decades, income segregation has increased dramatically (Taylor and Frye, 2012). Increasingly, American children grow up with other children of a similar economic position. Although members of the African-American middle-class are much more likely to live in more racially diverse neighborhoods than white middle-class individuals, there is little doubt that compared to working-class and poor families, they live in relatively elite settings (Pattillo, 2013). And, as many studies of class and child rearing have shown, middle-class parents (black and white) aggressively seek to transmit advantages to their children (Lareau, 2011; Pallas and Jennings, 2009). For the most part, middle-class parents succeed; children of middle-class parents have highly favorable life chances in a host of arenas relative to children born to working-class or poor parents (see Goyette, forthcoming for a review).

Thus, the literature testifies to the importance of *place* in determining children's life chances. It therefore implies a strong interest in the processes that lead to the segregative distribution of families across neighborhoods. However, much of the research on residential segregation has been geared towards describing macro-level patterns rather than the micro-level interactions through which these patterns are constituted and sustained over time. Furthermore, to the extent that researchers have turned their attention to the study of residential decision-making, their focus has often been on explicating the choices made by poor families moving into and out of urban neighborhoods. While this focus is entirely understandable—especially in work with a policy orientation—it has, arguably, led to a loss of interest in more general features of the process of residential decision-making.

This is especially clear with regard to the role of networks, which have received surprisingly little attention in research on residential decision-making outside the context of studies of the poor (e.g. Boyd 2008). While many decades of research have stressed the importance of amenities (such as schools) to families' choices, few have asked the question of how families acquire information about the characteristics of particular neighborhoods and how they form a preference for (or an aversion to) these neighborhoods. Our results suggest that network ties are crucial in this regard, regardless of families' class or race: far from conducting systematic "research" on the range of options open to them—examining school performance, crime rates, consumption opportunities, housing value changes, and so forth—the majority of the families in our data were guided toward a set of neighborhoods by trusted network contacts. These contacts could be friends, coworkers, or kin, but their influence is hard to overstate.

In a certain sense, the importance of network contacts may seem unsurprising, since the range of options available in the metropolitan area we studied was potentially daunting. On this view,

reliance on trusted contacts would simply be a means of reducing the complexity of sifting through these options. However, the families' networks were themselves heavily segregated, by both race and class, and the steering effect exerted by network contacts tended to reflect this: overwhelmingly, families considered only neighborhoods populated primarily by people who were demographically and economically similar to themselves (i.e., "people like them"). Thus, at least on our view, residential decision-making need not be motivated by an explicit desire to avoid particular groups in order to bring about a segregative result. Put differently, there is ample evidence of racial discrimination and racial exclusion on the part of whites towards other racial and ethnic groups, particularly African-American families. Nonetheless, in this study, we are struck by the crucial role of social networks in framing segregative choices rather than a "smoking gun" of overt discrimination. The social homogeneity, our data suggest, of networks may be enough to bring about such a result.

The "mental maps" families drew on in the neighborhood search process often reinforce this process. Most families considered only a highly truncated set of the neighborhoods that were potential feasible (i.e. economically within reach and within commuting distance of their jobs). Similar to what Krysan and Bader (2009) refer to as "blind spots" and what Sharkey (2009) terms "cognitive constraints," the maps our subjects drew on greyed out much of metropolitan area, leaving only a small number of socially homogenous neighborhoods within the choice set. It is, of course, difficult to pinpoint the origin of these mental maps, since they are lodged "deep in people's brains." In some cases—including, especially, the relocators, who came the area with very little knowledge of its social geography—they were clearly influenced by network members; in others, they appeared to the result simply of accumulated experiences of the metropolitan area.

Our interview data do not enable us to elucidate the relation between these maps and respondents' social network ties. In some cases—especially those of families who relocated to the area shortly before we conducted our interviews—it seems likely that advice from network members was at least partly constitutive of respondents' mental maps. Among individuals who had lived in the area for long time, by contrast, we can only assume that the maps they drew on were the result of their own accumulated experience, as well as factors such as media characterizations of different communities. What was apparent in the data, however, was a general concordance between respondents' maps and the advice they received through network ties.

Taken together, these results have a number of implications for studies of residential decision-making and, more generally, of residential segregation. First, we would argue that the choice of a neighborhood should not be conflated with the choice of a home. In our data, these decisions were sequential, and very different in character. As we have described, the first, the choice of a neighborhood, tended to be highly abbreviated, guided by network ties, and reliant on vague information. The second, by contrast, was more systematic, with careful comparison of the features of different properties and explicit consideration of their costs and benefits.

Secondly, our results suggest that researchers need to use significant caution when considering abstract models of neighborhood choice or experiments designed to reveal preferences. The truncated maps that most of our respondents relied on do not resemble the situation created, for

example, by experimenters who present subjects with a (relatively large) set of alternatives that vary starkly across one or two key variables, and then ask them to make a choice. While experiments of this sort may be effective at revealing preferences (or biases) the subjects are unwilling to articulate, one cannot assume that they disclose the actual processes—cognitive or social—that lead individuals and families to particular neighborhoods.

More generally, our results suggest a modification of sociological views concerning the intergenerational transmission of life chances. Much of this research (Demerath, 2009; Hays 1996; Lareau 2011, Weiss 2008) documents ways in which parents work assiduously to enhance their children's outcomes. Our data, however, imply that the advantages or disadvantages that accrue to children as result of their residential neighborhood are rarely the result of "concerted cultivation" or other elaborate strategies. Rather, guided by their networks and by highly truncated mental maps, parents often appear to "sleepwalk" into particular neighborhoods. Each of these neighborhoods or localities has been shaped by historical forces, from zoning and tax policy to housing regulation, lending practices, and infrastructure development, and as a significant literature attests, they have widely varying implications for children's life chances. However, even schools—the public good which, according to our respondents themselves, played the largest role in their decision-making—are rarely the object of any sustained "research" or consideration. In our data, this was as true of upper-middle-class parents as it was of their working-class counterparts. And in this regard, the choice of a neighborhood stands in interesting contrast to other choice processes, such as the selection of a child's college—which, researchers have shown tends to be energetic, systematic, and anxious, at least among the middle class (Stevens 2009). In this paper we have attempted to unpack some of the mechanisms through which residential segregation is recreated over time. One finding, perhaps ironic, is that the process seems to be quite similar for families across the class spectrum. Nevertheless, given the social segregation that tends to characterize social networks, the outcome tends to engender social reproduction.

Table 1. Core Sample of Parents

	White Families		Black Families		Interracial Families		Total		Total by Class
	Urban	Suburban	Urban	Suburban	Urban	Suburban	Urban	Suburban	
Upper middle-class	7	11	5	5	1	0	13	16	29
Middle-class	6	9	7	4	0	2	13	15	28
Working Class	6	5	9	9	0	1	15	15	30
Total	19	25	21	18	1	3	41	46	
Total by Race	44		39		4				87

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