

# When Professional Power Fails: A Power Relations Perspective

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Social work professionals rely on claims of exclusive knowledge expertise and a code of ethics to exercise professional power and autonomy. Yet they may find themselves in organizational settings that diminish their professional power. In this case study of a supportive housing program for chronically homeless persons, we find that the professional social workers lost their power to property managers in critical decisions about their clients. Using a power relations perspective, we show that the social workers' inability to use their professional power can be explained by the dominance of external stakeholders whose interests gave primacy to property management over social services. We use the case study to demonstrate that a power relations perspective, often overlooked in research on human service organizations, provides a strong explanatory model that can be harnessed to understand the organizational conditions that affect the power of social workers to exercise their professional knowledge.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Like other professionals, social workers use their claim to an exclusive and evidence-based body of knowledge as justification for their professional power (Abbott 1988). At the same time, the code of ethics of the profession aims to ensure that such power will not be abused (Reamer 2013). Following Andrew Abbott (1988), we define professional knowledge of an occupational group, such as social workers, to be its claim for jurisdiction over a problem area, such as child maltreatment. This claim is supported by professional knowledge's ability to articulate the tools to diagnose the problem, its capacity to provide effective treatment, and a causal inference between the two. Often, this exclusive knowledge is developed and transmitted in academic settings that are mandated to train future professionals.

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0037-7961/2016/9003-0001\$10.00

By virtue of their claim to an exclusive body of knowledge, social workers expect to exercise considerable professional power. They expect to retain their jurisdiction over the problem area in the face of competition from other occupational groups, such as clinical psychologists, and to enjoy substantial autonomy and discretion in their practice (Dingwall and Lewis 1983; Freidson 1986; Abbott 1988). The retention of such jurisdiction and the claims for monopoly over professional knowledge may be buttressed by membership in professional associations that regulate professional practice and by state licensing (Scott 2008). Arguably, then, the professional power of social workers within human service organizations arises from their monopoly over exclusive knowledge-based expertise, the trust they evoke in their ethics-driven relations with clients, and their pivotal role in legitimating the organization's service mandate.

We know from extant research that social workers are sometimes constrained in exercising their professional power when they compete with professionals from more prestigious professions who set managerial barriers through control over organizational resources, rules, and practices (e.g., Ben-Sira and Szyf 1992; Smith and Donovan 2003; Brodwin 2013). For example, Camille Gregorian (2005, 11) recounts how "hospital social workers have had their share of turf battles and power struggles with other professionals who compete with them to provide psycho-social care," particularly nurses (Mizrahi and Berger 2001).

What is less apparent from the research is that social workers can also be stripped of their professional power even when they are the dominant, and possibly exclusive, profession in the organization. As our study demonstrates, the ability of social workers to exercise their professional power is contingent on the political and resource environment of the organization in which they work, the interests of stakeholders who control the organization's key resources and legitimacy, and the structural adaptations taken by organizational leaders to meet these interests. We show that these forces can and do, under certain conditions, trump the professional power of the social workers, even in the absence of competition from other occupational groups of equal or higher status.

Our findings emerge from a case study of a human service organization that provides permanent supportive housing with wrap-around social services to chronically homeless persons. As researchers, we were called upon to identify the reasons for frictions between the social workers and the property managers in this organization and to devise strategies to minimize them.

In the course of our field research, we gathered extensive observational and interview data that repeatedly demonstrated that these conflicts arose at critical clinical decision junctures in the service trajectories of the residents that involved the participation of both the social workers and the property managers. Decisions, such as those that deny acceptance to the program, sanction clients for behavior related to their disabilities, or initiate eviction proceedings, are critical because they influence the well-being of the clients; they either provide them with or deprive them of scarce and valued organizational resources. They are clinical since they always involve a psychosocial assessment of the clients, which provides a key input into the decision-making process.

While we expected the social workers to dominate these critical decisions, we found that the property managers actually determined the decisions' outcomes and that the social workers became powerless in these situations. We found that the social workers' inability to exercise their professional power led to decision outcomes that negated their professional judgments. Outcomes such as withdrawal of privileges and threat of eviction were meted for behaviors that were often directly related to the disabilities that qualified the residents for the program in the first place. The residents, too, were stripped of having any significant voice in the decisions about their own service trajectory.

These findings led us to ask the following questions: Why did the perspectives, interests, and judgments of property managers, who lacked educational and professional credentials, tend to prevail over the professional judgment of social workers? What were the structural conditions that brought about such profound limits on the professional power of the social workers in these critical decision junctures? To answer these questions, we gathered additional data and re-analyzed data we had already collected. As we engaged in data analysis and interpretation, we adopted a power relations perspective that melds together concepts and propositions from institutional theory, the political economy of organizations, and resource dependence theory.

Our aim is to demonstrate the usefulness of a power relations perspective, which diverges from much of the contemporary research on organizations in general and human service organizations in particular, in understanding organizational practices. Leading researchers on organizations, such as Charles Perrow (1986), Christopher Hinings and Royston Greenwood (2002), Stewart Clegg, David Courpasson, and Nelson Phillips (2006),

Gerald Davis and J. Adam Cobb (2010), Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam (2012), and Steven Vallas and Andrea Hill (2012), argue that both the cultural turn in organizational theory and its appropriation by managerial elites and business schools have diverted attention away from the importance of power relations in explaining organizational practices.

In its disregard of power, organizational theory has lost its critical perspective. As Vallas and Hill (2012) note, the cultural turn, as expressed by neo-institutional theory, tends to ignore conflict and struggle within organizations. As they put it, “The dilemmas that confront neo-institutionalist theory stem from its failure to advance a viable conception of how power operates, whether within the firm, the organizational field, or the political economy writ large” (Vallas and Hill 2012, 171). Paul DiMaggio (1988) himself acknowledges that neo-institutional theory lacks a conception of agency, power, and conflict. In related work, Clegg and colleagues (2006) show convincingly that cultural theories of organizations cannot explain why organizations, particularly human service organizations, may engage in oppressive practices. Institutional logics, another cultural theory, also tends to be silent about the political and economic struggles over competing logics and the forces that lead to patterns of dominance and subordination among and within organizations (Fligstein and McAdam 2015).

This article makes three key contributions. First, we show that a power relations perspective offers a valuable lens through which to understand the periodic and yet systematic disempowerment of professional social workers, even at critical decision junctures in their clients’ service trajectories. Second, we explore how a power relations perspective, when applied to human service organizations, can be generalized to provide a better understanding of the structural conditions that influence the distribution and exercise of power among different occupational groups within the organization and how these influence organizational practices. Third, we show how the power relations perspective reveals the structural conditions that lead vulnerable groups, such as homeless persons, to become powerless clients in organizations. The article concludes by proposing that in order for social workers to exercise their professional power, they need to forge alliances with external (and internal) stakeholders who share their values. These stakeholders need to have the power to influence social policies and programs that promote the interests and well-being of their clients. Such alliances are especially critical when social workers serve vulnerable clients who are politically marginalized within organizations.

### A POWER RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

The focus of our study is to understand how critical decisions about clients, from intake to exit, are shaped by the power dynamics between the representatives of the occupational groups involved in these decisions and the relationship between these dynamics and the broader external and internal power relations in the organization. We view these decision-making processes as political processes in which power holders “push for preferred alternatives, whether or not these will lead to decisions that are of general benefit” (Miller and Wilson 2006, 471). In this context, power is the ability of persons or groups within the organization to affect the outcome of organizational decisions to favor their interests over the interests of other persons or groups participating in these decisions (Flood and Scott 1978; Perrow 1986).

The decision-making process also involves contentions over knowledge and who controls valued knowledge that can determine the decision outcomes. While possession of knowledge such as professional expertise or particular skills can then confer power in the decision-making process, having power also determines what constitutes valued knowledge (Foucault 1977).

To understand how power is exercised by the different occupational groups that participate in these critical decisions, we use a power relations perspective that melds together concepts and propositions from three inter-related organizational theories: old institutional theory, political economy of organizations, and resource dependence (all three are defined in the paragraphs that follow). All three theories problematize the relationship between the organization and its external environment, arguing that the need to mobilize legitimacy and resources controlled by key stakeholders and the strategies selected to secure them have a major effect on internal power relations.

We begin by acknowledging the contribution of the *old institutional theory*, as articulated by Philip Selznick (1996). This theory advances the proposition that the organization adapts its practices in response to stakeholders who have interest in the organization and its outputs and who use their control over valued resources to influence organizational practices to their advantage. It is the leadership of the organization, then, that engages in major negotiations between the organization and its various stakeholders. The accommodations leaders make in response to the demands of powerful and influential stakeholders will define the actual goals and practices of the organization (Selznick 1957).

The insights provided by the old institutional theory serve as the foundation for the *political economy of organizations* that Mayer Zald (1970) formulates in his study of the transformation of the YMCA from an evangelical mission to a membership service organization. Not unlike institutional theory, the political economy of organizations, as elaborated by Gary Wamsley and Mayer Zald (1976), posits that the demands, conflicts, and negotiations of the organization within its external political economy will influence its internal political economy, namely, how power and resources will be distributed among various occupational groups in the production of the organization's services (Benson 1975). The political economy perspective extends the insights of institutional theory by specifying the political and economic conditions that influence organizational structure and practices. The political environment, consisting of centers of legitimacy and power, shapes the organization's ability to exist and set goals. The economic environment influences demand for organizational services, as well as the availability of material resources to meet these demands.

We further augment political economy of organizations with *resource dependence theory* to specify the particular mechanisms that give certain actors within and outside the organization power over other actors (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Resource dependence theory is based on the foundational concept of power-dependence relations, in which the greater the dependence of A on resources controlled by B that cannot be obtained elsewhere, the greater the power of B over A (Emerson 1975). Applied to organizations, this theory proposes that the more an internal work group reinforces the attentiveness and mobilization of legitimacy and resources of a powerful external interest group, the greater the accretion of power by that group within the organization. In other words, internal work groups that have the skills, expertise, and resources to better meet the interests and demands of more powerful stakeholders will acquire more power within the organization than other work groups that may lack these skills, expertise, and resources. Therefore, the interests of the powerful external stakeholders are most likely to be expressed in the internal political economy, which constitutes "the means organizational leaders use to perpetuate power and the structures of dominance they thrive to create and legitimize" (Clegg et al. 2006, 17).

In their seminal study of the relative power of different academic units within the university, Gerald Salancik and Jeffrey Pfeffer (1974) show that such power is a function of the ability of the units to mobilize external re-

sources that are essential to the university (e.g., grants and contracts) and that such power is used internally to buttress the position of such units within the university. W. Richard Scott and colleagues (2000) find that the marketization and commercialization of health care introduced powerful stakeholders pushing for greater sales of medical services that, in turn, increased the power of business-oriented hospital managers while it diminished the power and autonomy of physicians in controlling the conditions of their work. Eve Garrow and Yeheskel Hasenfeld (2012, 147), in their study of social enterprises, propose and find evidence that “the greater the dependence of the organization on revenues from its business enterprise, the more dominant [the business enterprise] will become in the organization.”

#### **THE ORGANIZATION UNDER STUDY**

Organizations that provide permanent supportive housing to chronically homeless persons are expected to have professional social workers in control of their service technologies. Funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Shelter Plus Care (S+C) program, such organizations are distinct because they provide permanent, affordable housing coupled with social services. Their target population is chronically homeless persons who have been without permanent housing for at least 1 year and who suffer from severe mental illness, chronic substance abuse, or HIV/AIDS. The logic of the S+C program is that housing and services must be closely linked in order to ensure stability of housing for this population (e.g., Tsemberis and Eisenberg 2000). Organizations that receive S+C funding require their residents to participate in ongoing case management and counseling and to comply with various services requirements prescribed by the social workers such as psychiatric treatment, personal improvement workshops, or participation in Alcoholics Anonymous (HUD 2002). Because these organizations are residential facilities, they also employ property managers who are nonprofessional workers in charge of the management of the buildings, including responding to maintenance needs, collecting rent, conducting periodic physical inspections of the apartments, and enforcing building rules.

The organization under study, Homeless Housing Corporation (HHC),<sup>1</sup> provides permanent supportive housing for persons experiencing chronic

1. The name of the organization is fictitious in order to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents.

homelessness. It is located in a large metropolitan area and owns 20 buildings with over 1,000 units dedicated to housing chronically homeless persons. According to the organization's records, the majority of the residents are male (75 percent), African American (73 percent), and have a median age of 46. Fifty-two percent of the residents suffer from mental illness, 45 percent suffer from substance abuse, and 7 percent have HIV/AIDS. Over half of the residents rely only on General Assistance benefits, while 31 percent receive Supplementary Security Income (SSI).

Under the S+C program, HUD provides the rent subsidy (based on its calculation of fair market rent), and the residents are expected to pay a third of their monthly income. The organization is required to match the rent subsidies dollar for dollar with social services provided either internally or through referrals to other service providers. To meet these requirements, HHC hired professional social workers (i.e., with MSW degrees) for each of its buildings. They were responsible for performing comprehensive needs assessments, developing case plans, providing crisis intervention and intensive case management, and initiating, monitoring, and following up on referrals to various health and social services agencies. Each social worker (titled "case manager" by the organization) had a caseload that varied from 20 to 35 residents. Supervision was provided by a couple of more senior social workers.

Each building also had a property manager, often a formerly homeless person. These workers were paid an annual salary of just under \$18,000 (in current dollars), and they lived in the buildings they managed. They were responsible for monitoring residents' compliance with building rules, collecting rent, undertaking periodic inspections of the apartments, and addressing building maintenance needs. The property managers were supervised by an experienced property manager who had been elevated to a supervisory position.

The middle management of HHC included the director of housing services, who was a seasoned mental health professional with years of experience in directing mental health services for homeless persons, and the associate director, who herself had an advanced degree in social work and years of experience working with homeless persons. They were assisted by the respective supervisors of the social workers and the property managers. The director was responsible for overseeing and addressing issues that arose in the encounters between the social workers, property managers, and residents. These issues included residents' failure to pay rent, conflicts between property managers and residents, difficulties social workers had respond-

ing to residents' behavioral issues, or conflict between social workers and property managers. The director held weekly staff meetings with the social workers and the property managers in which these issues were discussed, intervention plans were formulated, and follow up on their implementation was reported.

#### HOMELESS HOUSING CORPORATION (HHC) HOMELESS SERVICES FIELD

To identify and analyze the stakeholders with which HHC transacted, we situate the organization in the homeless services field. The homeless services field can be defined as all the organizations dedicated to serving homeless people, such as providers of fiscal resources, regulatory agencies, affordable housing developers, service providers, providers of staff and volunteers, consumers, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders related to homelessness (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). It is within this field that HHC attempted to secure fiscal resources and legitimacy, comply with numerous regulatory requirements, mobilize supportive social services, and recruit homeless persons to its program. In interviews, HHC executive staff identified the following key stakeholders:

- Equity investors interested in purchasing tax credits and using the depreciation of the buildings as tax write-offs. HHC pays the mortgage to the equity investors out of the revenues each building generates (i.e., HUD rent subsidies plus tenants' rent).
- HUD, which defines the categories of homeless persons who are eligible to be housed in the S+C programs and qualify for its rent subsidies. The local housing authority is delegated with the responsibility of enforcing HUD regulations, certifying the continued eligibility of the residents, and the regular inspections of the buildings to ensure that they are up to code.
- Social service providers who were willing to serve HHC residents. With the exception of a few small and time-limited grants, HHC did not receive funding for health and social services such as medical and psychiatric treatment. It relied on collaborative relations and the eligibility of its residents to obtain needed services from local service providers.
- The residents. Potential residents had to apply for HHC housing, fit the eligibility criteria of being a chronically homeless person with serious disabling conditions, and regularly reactivate their applications while waiting for available housing units.

**TABLE 1.** HHC Sources of Revenue (%)

Source	%
Property rental revenue	63.3
Capital grants	15.0
Public grants	14.7
Private grants	5.4
Contributions	1.0
Interest—other	.5
Total	99.9

Source. Homeless Housing Corporation Annual Report.

Table 1 presents the sources of revenue for the organization during the study period. It shows that most of its revenues derived from HUD rent subsidies, followed by property development grants (i.e., capital and public).

#### **METHOD**

For a period of 2 years,<sup>2</sup> the authors and a research assistant undertook extensive participant observations of daily activities and routines in each building; observed encounters between property managers, social workers, and residents; and attended various regular meetings of staff and residents. In addition, the research team interviewed the social workers and managers and conducted several focus groups with a subset of property managers, social workers, and residents. Because we were particularly interested in the decision-making processes regarding three critical decisions—admission of homeless persons to the organization, responses to residents' behavioral issues such as failure to pay rent, and eviction—we made considerable effort to attend and record the meetings in which these decisions were being made. We also interviewed the social workers and property managers specifically about their perceptions and experiences of participating in these decision-making processes.

Although the choice of HHC as a case study was made at the request of the organization, it presented us with what Bent Flyvbjerg (2006, 229) terms a “critical case,” which he defines “as having strategic importance in relation to the general problem,” which, in this instance, is identifying and understanding organizational conditions that lead to the erosion of professional power, particularly by social workers.

2. The study took place within the current decade. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, we do not specify the exact dates the study took place.

## DATA

*Field Observations*

The research assistant spent over 180 hours spread over 2 years in direct observations at the various buildings, observing activities and engaging in casual conversations with residents and staff. When opportunities arose, she engaged the residents in conversations about what it was like to live in the building. Similarly, she had opportunities to observe incidences in which property managers and social workers had to respond to and attempt to resolve conflicts with residents or between themselves. Following each observation, the research assistant wrote a summary memo to highlight some of the major themes that emerged. These were discussed by the team and further elaborated on in each memo.

*Residents' Meetings*

The research assistant observed 15 residents' meetings, usually lasting about 2 hours, in the different buildings. The meetings were devoted to addressing various building management issues and concerns raised by the residents. She also engaged in casual conversations with residents before and after the meetings about their concerns with the program and the various issues that emerged during the meetings.

*Staff Meetings*

We attended 31 2-hour staff meetings at various buildings that included middle managers, social workers, and property managers. The meetings were mostly devoted to handling problems with residents. As we began to recognize the importance of these meetings in affecting the service trajectories of the residents, we focused more closely on three key decisions—whom to admit to the program, how to handle residents' behavioral issues, and when to evict residents. These decisions always involved the participation of social workers, property managers, and middle managers. In addition to attending and observing these decision-making meetings, we recorded what the social workers and the property managers said, what decision outcomes they pursued, the interchanges between them, and the positions taken by the middle managers.

*Individual Interviews*

We conducted semi-structured interviews that lasted between 1 and 2 hours with all of the property managers ( $n = 8$ ) and their supervisors ( $n = 2$ ). Some

of the questions included, “What is your role in the agency?” “What are the main challenges working in a place like this?” “Do you have issues with case management?” “Do case managers ever interfere with your ability to do your job?” We conducted semi-structured interviews with most of the social workers ( $n = 6$ ) and their supervisor ( $n = 1$ ). Some of the questions included, “What is your role as case manager?” “What does the agency expect of you?” “What kinds of problems could lead to a client losing their housing?” “Tell us about your relationship with the property managers.” We also interviewed the director and the associate director of housing services, the respective supervisors of the social workers and property managers, the director of finances, and the CEO ( $n = 6$ ). All of the interviews were transcribed.

#### *Focus Groups*

We conducted two focus groups with the residents of the two largest residential buildings (a total of 15 participants). We drew purposive samples for each focus group to represent the demographics and disabling conditions of the buildings’ residents. In the focus groups, residents talked about their experiences and issues in living at HHC. We probed with such questions as, “What are the best and the worst things about living here?” “How about house rules?” “What about the property managers and about the job they do?” “How do you feel about your social worker?” We conducted one focus group with 8 out of the 10 property managers. They discussed the challenges of managing their buildings and their relations with the residents and with the social workers. We led with such questions as: “What is expected of you in this role as property manager?” “How do you know when a client is really problematic?” “How do you know when it is time for a client to go?” “What is the difference between the social worker approach and the property manager approach?” We also held a focus group with all of the social workers (11 participants) covering similar themes, such as: “Tell us a bit about the scope of your job and what is expected of you as a case manager. Describe case management vs. property management, who does what? Overlap? You both work with clients, you have to sort out who does what?”

#### *Documents*

Over the course of the study, we gathered over 180 documents, including HUD regulations, intake forms and interviewing scripts, internal memos and training materials, various job descriptions, HHC mission statements and financial reports, internal newsletters, and media presentations. They were all coded into the categories we generated for the purpose of the analysis.

## ANALYSIS

All the data were entered into Atlas ti, and their coding and categorization occurred in two phases. In the first phase, we were trying to understand the daily routines of all the actors (property managers, social workers, and residents) and to generate categories and themes that seem best to describe them (Wolcott 1994). We began with a series of codes to capture the various aspects of the daily routines and recurrent patterns of interaction among the actors. Through an iterative process, we revised and refined them (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011) until we had a good grasp of the interactional routines exercised by the property managers, social workers, and residents. Given the initial focus of the study, we paid particular attention to the relations between property managers and social workers, identifying events that signaled contentious encounters or statements by the various actors about the quality of their relations.

As we became more aware of the critical importance of the decision-making processes determining the fate of the residents, as well as the distinct roles that the property managers and the social workers played in these decisions, we shifted to the second phase, in which we were trying to understand how the different actors triggered and influenced these decisions and what power they exercised in this process. We collected additional data on these decisions, particularly on the actions that followed the decisions and their consequences to the residents. We were also sensitive to the multiple interpretations of the residents' behavior that prompted tensions and conflicts among the actors and the processes they used to resolve them.

Our reliance on various data sources enabled convergence of perspectives on emerging themes, which improved the credibility of the qualitative findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Miles and Huberman 1994). We developed a series of analytic categories, such as relational patterns between the social workers and the property managers, workers' struggles to meet the demands of external stakeholders such as the housing authority, the roles of supervisors and middle managers, the expressions of powerlessness by the residents, constraints on professional autonomy, and the discretion of property managers to explain the patterns we observed in the data. The coding was done by the authors and the research assistant. When we had disagreements about the coding, we discussed them, reviewed the data again, and were able to converge toward an agreement about the proper code.

Guided by the lens of the power relations perspective, we also wrote analytic memos to further examine the relationship between the data and

the theoretical constructs (Hesse-Biber, Nagy, and Leavy 2010). We then discarded or revised constructs as we assessed their efficacy and clarity to understand the observed patterns (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Eisenhardt 1989).

## RESULTS

We find that the social workers had two distinct interaction patterns with property managers and residents. The first characterizes the social workers' clinical routines, in which they were able to exercise their professional power and autonomy. The second was triggered when critical decisions about the residents had to be made that put social workers at odds with the interests of property managers. These decision junctures occurred during intake, in responses to behavioral issues, and around possible evictions. As we show, in the clinical routines the professional power of the social workers was affirmed and remained unchallenged. By contrast, in critical decision-making junctures, the power of the social workers was undermined.

### THE CLINICAL ROUTINES

At HHC, all of the social workers we interviewed told us that they employed their professional expertise when they held individual or group sessions with their clients. At the weekly staff meetings discussing their clients, social workers often evoked their psychotherapeutic knowledge to explain why they had chosen certain diagnoses and treatment practices. In all of our observations and interviews, we never observed the property managers interfering with or attempting to interfere with the professional judgments and practices of the social workers in their clinical interactions with their clients.

### CRITICAL DECISION MAKING

By contrast, we observed that the property managers usurped the professional power of the social workers during critical decision-making junctures concerning the residents that held profound implications for their well-being and housing. It is important to re-emphasize that the *raison d'être* of the organization is to keep the residents housed and that keeping residents housed is in itself the most important therapeutic tool the organization has to enhance and maintain the well-being of the residents.

Residents at HHC with serious mental health and substance abuse histories periodically presented behavioral issues that required clinical assessment, psychosocial treatment, and property management responses that called for co-actions by the social workers and the property managers. Invariably, these issues arose when the property managers perceived and reported unacceptable behaviors by the residents, such as failure to abide by building rules, disrespectful or aggressive interactions, or failure to pay rent. We find that these were occasions when the views and practices of the social workers and property managers collided and the power relations between them were contested. They occurred in the three critical decision areas we identified earlier: selection of appropriate residents, rule infractions and sanctions, and eviction. In each of these decision areas, a struggle ensued between the property managers and the social workers about whose interests and practices would dominate. As we show below, the middle managers, particularly the director of housing services and the respective supervisors of the social workers and the property managers, played a critical role in setting constraints on how the property managers and social workers could express their interests and occupational judgements. In turn, the power relations between the actors were profoundly altered such that the property managers gained a power advantage over the social workers.

#### *Selection of Residents*

Formally, homeless persons qualify for S+C if they have been chronically homeless, suffer from a chronic disability, and meet a low-income eligibility that would qualify them for either SSI or public assistance. Once applicants were approved by HHC and reached the top of the waiting list for a vacant S+C unit, they were scheduled to be interviewed by the property manager and the social worker of the building.

We find that these interviews became contests between competing interests. We observed that the social workers brought their professional knowledge and skills to assess the suitability of the applicants for treatment in a supportive housing environment and told us that they expected that applicants would exhibit the characteristics (i.e., chronically homeless along with chronic mental health or health disabilities) that qualified them for admittance to HHC. As a social worker explained in an interview: “We know people are coming into our program with some issues, we don’t like to turn them away because they’re acting like a loon in the interview—we know that already.”

By contrast, we observed that during the intake interviews property managers attempted to select residents who would, in their view, be easiest to manage in a restrictive residential environment. In our observations of intake interviews, we noted that the property managers used an interview protocol “to determine the applicant’s responsibility toward their homelessness and have they gained any new skills or insights that suggest, with support services, they may be able to succeed in permanent housing” (quoting from a HHC internal document titled “Sample Questions for an Interview”). Guided by the protocol, they looked for people who had “given up the homeless way of life,” were drug-free, and were motivated to follow the house rules. One property manager we interviewed put it in these terms: “If you show real, real serious emotions, get angry, are super, super arrogant, we know you are going to be a problem. . . . Then we look at the record at how many times you had been kicked out [of other residential programs]. How many times we had some issues. . . . When we see that, we’re like, ‘No. These people are just not ready.’”

We find that the social workers’ expectation that their professional judgment would prevail was often upended during the intake process. For one, their professional status was contested by one of the middle managers, the property management supervisor, who was present at the interviews and who would not permit the social workers to fully use their knowledge and expertise in the selection of residents. An excerpt from an actual intake interview provides an illustration:

SOCIAL WORKER: Where are you staying now?

APPLICANT: I became homeless 3 years ago in [location] because of addiction, and I’m staying at [single room occupancy hotel].

SOCIAL WORKER: Are you currently using?

APPLICANT: I’m clean.

PROPERTY MANAGER SUPERVISOR: (*Interrupting the social worker*)  
Tell [the applicant] what’s your role.

SOCIAL WORKER: So you don’t want me to do the full interview?

PROPERTY MANAGER SUPERVISOR: No, that’s his [the property manager’s] role. This is why I’m sitting in. Just talk about what your role will be.

The social worker then described her role in helping residents meet their treatment goals and linking them up with resources in the community. The property manager supervisor asked the applicant a few questions about his

history of substance abuse, including a past arrest, and then posed “test” questions.

PROPERTY MANAGER SUPERVISOR: How do you think that will make you feel when [your] neighbor’s drug use will affect you just in your general quality of life—like going in and out all night because of drug use?

APPLICANT: I already experienced this at [single room occupancy hotel] and it wouldn’t be a problem for me.

PROPERTY MANAGER SUPERVISOR: Are you ready for independent living?  
(*Applicant nods*)

PROPERTY MANAGER SUPERVISOR: Can you handle the decreased level of structure? There’s no one taking money from your check here.

APPLICANT: I already know I don’t want to do drugs. I want to go forward, not backward. I don’t think I need that much structure anymore.

During intake, the social worker and the property manager were expected to come to a joint decision. But, as shown in the above example, the social worker’s ability to apply her professional diagnostic skills was highly constrained when she was silenced by the property management supervisor. The resulting decision privileged the interests of the property manager.

The devaluation of the social worker’s role did not always go unchallenged. For example, the above interchange triggered a visible conflict between the social worker and the property manager supervisor at the next staff meeting. The social worker accused the property manager supervisor of reprimanding her in front of the applicant, and the property manager supervisor responded by accusing the social worker of “basically trying to drive the interview.” The property manager supervisor argued that she did not want the applicant to get the impression that the social worker was the “main person.” She said, “I just don’t want them to get that kind of thinking in their head that the property manager is just someone to ask when you need to know where the bathroom is.”

### *Being Put on the “Hotlist”*

When the property managers spotted a resident doing something that could be construed as a rule violation, they could issue a verbal warning or write up a formal infraction. A log of rule infractions maintained by the property managers included such entries as “argues with property manager; vindictive actions to annoy property manager; violation of guest policy; property damage; threaten staff; [room] dirty—bad odor, late on rent.” Three formal

infractions constituted cause for eviction. The property managers relied on the house rules, which provided an organizationally warranted interpretation of problematic behavior as a signifier of a bad tenant. A property manager we interviewed put it succinctly: “You [social worker] can’t come to me and ask me not to enforce any rules on this tenant because there are 45 units in this building. If I allow this tenant to do something, I have to let everyone in here do it.”

In particular, we observed that when residents’ mental health problems or drug addiction issues caused them to be in arrear with their rent, the property managers seized on such infractions to put the residents on the “hotlist” as candidates for eviction. Unlike behavioral issues, failure to pay rent could be readily held up in court as a legal justification for eviction. A property manager we interviewed put it this way: “Let’s say it is a mental illness case and a substance abuse case. We try to give them a payment plan. Sometimes they owe too much [rent], say \$800, and won’t meet you half way—for example, they try to argue for paying \$50 per month until it is paid back. That won’t fly with us. They’ll never get caught up. . . . So I say, I can give you a 3-day notice, and you can leave and avoid the eviction.”

We find that the social workers interpreted the residents’ failure to pay rent quite differently. The social workers expected behavioral issues due to the chronic psychological barriers the residents faced in their daily lives. For them they were a signifier of the residents’ mental illness or substance abuse issues. A social worker we interviewed contrasted her interpretation of the residents’ behavioral problems with that of the property manager as follows: “This person was late for rent this amount of time, and it can’t happen anymore. Our take may be, ‘Yeah but before this she lived on a couch in [location] park for 8 years so she’s going to have a hard time with the concept of paying rent on time.’ ‘Yes and she’s gotten infractions [for failing the room inspection].’ And we again have to say, ‘She lived on a couch for 8 years in [location] park so she’s not really familiar with brooms and mops.’ I know when it comes down to it you must have your room ready for spraying, you must pay rent, but we also need to hear the tenant’s side. For some [one] who has not habituated to doing that for 8 years for 10 years for 20 years, how do you change this behavior? It’s not going to happen overnight. It isn’t.”

Using her professional knowledge and expertise, the social worker attempted to exert her professional power to give her therapeutic practice

greater currency than rule enforcement and payment of rent. It is important to emphasize that the organization could forgive the residents' inability to pay the rent and enable the social workers to pursue a therapeutic alternative without the threat of eviction. A social worker put it this way in an interview: "I don't think we can be too sensitive when we're trying to help an addict that didn't pay their rent. Property manager is like, they didn't pay their rent so they should be evicted and I think, where is the agency's obligation to like, no matter what, keep this person housed?"

Nonetheless, in our observations of the "hotlists," the social workers invariably lost out because the director of housing services, who presided over the meetings where evictions and infractions were discussed, harnessed therapeutic interventions in the service of enforcing compliance with the house rules. The director of housing services was quite blunt about it in an interview: "I'm not embarrassed to blackmail people when behavior and health are so obviously deteriorating and their housing is important to them to say, I'm not afraid of saying, 'You're going to get evicted, unless . . .'" The property management supervisors also reinforced this perspective. In an exchange concerning a resident on the "hotlist," for example, a property manager supervisor said, "Property management deals with the behavior, and case management helps the client deal with the consequences."

In sum, we find that the property managers' interests and practices gained prominence, while the social workers were unable to use their professional values, knowledge, and expertise to effectively challenge or override the property managers' construction of the residents' behavior problems as rule infraction. In fact, the use of the social workers' professional skills to persuade the residents to comply with the housing rules reified the definition of residents' problem behaviors as willful disobedience rather than mental health symptomology. At best, the social workers' professional skills and practices could only complement those of the property managers as an opportunity for therapeutic intervention. In particular, the social workers recognized that they lacked the power to negate the property managers' actions. Responding to a question in an interview on whether the property managers had more power than social workers in these meetings, a social worker replied: "Yes. Because they have the ability to evict someone. . . . If they want to keep someone, they're staying. If I want to keep someone, if property manager doesn't, then they go. It would take a lot to convince them otherwise."

*Eviction*

We observed that residents on the “hotlist” who continued to exhibit behavioral difficulties were likely to face eviction. During the course of our study, the annual turnover rate, which included eviction and otherwise coerced departure, was about 15 percent. Eviction was typically justified on the basis of failure to pay rent, which triggered a 3-day notice issued by the property manager to either comply or face eviction. To successfully evict the resident or convince the resident to leave voluntarily, the director of housing services required the social workers to collect extensive supportive documentation. A property manager described the process of eviction as follows in an interview: “We give them a choice—leave voluntarily or face eviction. [Property manager supervisor] and I make the final decision with regard to evicting someone. We consult with [the social worker]. We finally just decide that the person cannot pay back the rent.” One of the leverages that both property managers and social workers used to encourage voluntary departure is a HUD rule that evicted residents are barred from eligibility for subsidized housing for 5 years.

During meetings on possible eviction, we observed that the social workers seldom challenged failure to pay rent as a cause for eviction. Rather, the social workers said that they helped their clients negotiate contracts with the property managers about the steps they needed to take to comply. A social worker described the crafting of a contract as follows: “[Property manager supervisor] will encourage me to find out what is going on with the client. The contract is created then . . . it is developed by the client and his/her social worker because the [social worker] is the supportive figure, while the property manager is the firm hand. Property manager has to sign the contract/approve it. So we’ll develop a contract where they [residents] will double up on their rent or they will agree to meet with a recovery specialist twice a week . . . or whatever issues that are causing them not to pay rent. But property manager usually tries to work with us and allows us to advocate for clients so that they are not evicted right away.”

Indeed, the social workers acknowledged that the only form of expertise left for them to use at this point was advocacy on behalf of their clients. A social worker told us that in preparing for the meeting about evicting her client, “I have to do my own research; I have to take steps to defend the oppressed—social workers are rarely in a position of power.” She added that when she went to eviction meetings, she felt like she was an attorney. To her, the meetings were essentially confrontational with a high demand for

evidence. She stated, “Management is looking for proof from social worker, and social worker has to give it to them.”

We recognize that there were some variations among the social workers about their views and interactions with the property managers. A few of the social workers did accept the property managers’ belief that residents who failed to comply with housing rules deserved to be evicted. Similarly, there were a few property managers who were more sympathetic to the viewpoints of the social workers. Nonetheless, our field data, including the focus groups and interviews with the property managers and the social workers, point to persistent dominant sets of beliefs and behavioral patterns that clearly typify each group. These were visibly expressed when it came to making the critical decisions about the residents. Indeed, members of each group collectively faced distinct work conditions and constraints on the repertoire of actions they could take in response to the residents’ behavioral problems. Moreover, the two groups were in competition for dominance in these decisions, and the members of each group tended to adhere to what they perceived to be their distinct expertise or skill. Each group also collectively engaged in sense making to justify the actions they had taken toward the residents.

#### **A POWER RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE ON HOMELESS HOUSING CORPORATION (HHC)**

Why were the professional judgments and practices of the social workers subverted when making critical decisions about the residents of HHC? To answer this question, we turn to the power relations perspective we enunciated earlier. We analyze the relations between HHC and its major stakeholders, paying close attention to the distribution of power and the political and economic constraints the stakeholders put on the organization. We then demonstrate why the organization seemed to give preference to the property management of its buildings over its social services. We show how these power relations help explain the limited ability of the social workers to exercise their professional power when it came to critical decisions about the residents.

#### **STAKEHOLDERS AND POWER RELATIONS ANALYSIS**

Our analysis reveals that HHC faced fiscal and regulatory pressures that led it to be preoccupied with selecting and retaining residents who would be

good tenants from a property management lens. These pressures arose from its dependence on equity investors and HUD, which controlled both the fiscal resources and the legitimacy of the organization. Because HHC had practically no other stakeholders that could offer these resources, the investors and HUD wielded considerable power over organizational practices. Concomitantly, while HHC relied on the local service providers to meet HUD's required social services, these exchange relations were mostly negotiated by the residents. Therefore, they had limited influence on either the organization or the providers. We demonstrate that the residents themselves, as stakeholders, were powerless in their relations with HHC, which explains why they had little capacity to influence organizational practices to meet their interests. Figure 1 presents the interests of the key stakeholders and their relative power over the practices of HHC.

First, the organization faced fiscal pressures from equity investors who were interested in purchasing tax credits and using the depreciation of the buildings as tax write-offs. Being in a field with very limited fiscal resources available for low-cost housing, HHC faced stiff competition from other organizations seeking similar sources of funding and investors. To attract these investors, HHC had to show that it could maintain the buildings as physi-

*Stakeholders' Interests*

		<i>Well-maintained buildings</i>	<i>Social services</i>	<i>Stable and respected tenancy</i>
<b>Power Advantage</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Equity investors HUD</b>	<b>HUD</b>	
	<b>Low</b>	<b>Residents</b>	<b>Service providers Residents</b>	<b>Residents</b>

FIGURE 1. Shelter Plus Care stakeholders

cally attractive, clean, and safe; pass housing inspections; have low maintenance costs; and generate the revenues, less maintenance and operating expenses, to pay the mortgage. To do so, management was motivated to select residents who would not engage in activities that might drive investors away. As the CEO put it in an interview, “Because it takes years to put these deals together, it is complicated and overly complex . . . a bad deal can blow your organization apart, . . . you certainly do not want someone [tenant] with issues in their life to clubber around in the room, or have bed-bugs, or be irrational in the community—[you don’t want] any of those things to occur. You spent so much time and money, millions of dollars that go into this, it makes you so risk-averse.”

Second, HHC was dependent on HUD for its rent subsidies, which accounted for over 60 percent of its budget (see table 1). HUD was also the primary legitimator and regulator of the organization. Like the equity investors, HUD pressured HHC to keep well-maintained buildings. To monitor and enforce its interest in the upkeep of the buildings, the local housing authority conducted weekly inspections and fumigation of at least one-quarter of the apartments in each building for cleanliness and hygiene, known as “Pugs Bugs.” For HHC, apartments failing inspection could provoke inspection of the entire building, and persistent inspection violations could risk the termination of the rent subsidies. As the director of housing services put it in an interview, “Our buildings on the property management side have a heavy reporting burden connected to them. So there’s that, then there’s the curb appeal of the building. The building has to look good, operate well, has to be clean.”

In particular, the organization tried hard to maintain drug-free buildings, even though it professed to practice a harm reduction model, and the director of housing services acknowledged in an interview that up to 40–60 percent of the residents were drug users. The CEO and middle managers also told us that they recognized that drug users were also likely to attract the police, which HHC wanted to avoid. Therefore, the motivation to have drug-free buildings stemmed from the desire to avoid residents who could become costly to the organization’s operating costs and who might tarnish its public image.

HUD also required HHC to demonstrate that it was providing social services commensurate with the rent subsidies it received. To meet that requirement and HUD’s auditing, HHC instituted an accounting system in which each service unit provided either internally or externally was

assigned a dollar value (e.g., a case management session equaled \$90.00 per hour). The managers gave the social workers monthly and annual targets of service units based on the number of apartments in their buildings. The social workers, in turn, assigned their clients a set number of service units or points they had to accumulate each month, and they monitored the clients via a record of service signed by each service provider. The associate director of housing reported that the local housing authority conducted annual audits, sampling case files and records of service. According to the director of housing services, a past failure to pass the audit had triggered punishing fines, which led to the implementation of the current accounting system.

In addition to its social workers, HHC relied heavily on local service providers to tender needed services to its residents. Without these services, HHC could not meet its matching requirement and risked losing its rental subsidies. Given its reliance on these service providers, who generally shared the same therapeutic goals and values of the social workers, we would expect that such exchange relations would empower the social workers. Yet this was not the case. Rather than institutionalizing exchange relations with local service providers, HHC opted to put the onus entirely on the residents themselves to connect to the service providers, and the residents were aware that if they did not comply with their service plans, they might be sanctioned or evicted. As stated by the associate director of housing, “Caseworkers are screaming at clients when they did not get signatures, etcetera, from service providers to acquire their points.”

As stakeholders of HHC, residents sought respite from the daily grind of the streets. They wanted safe, secure, and stable permanent affordable housing. As tenants, they wanted staff members to treat them with respect and dignity. Yet, as stakeholders, they were dependent on HHC. Because the demand for permanent supportive housing was so acute and the supply very limited, HHC could exercise considerable power on whom to admit or reject, and whom to evict. Residents had little or no countervailing power to have their interests met by HHC. To paraphrase Hirschman (1970), they hardly had an acceptable exit option if they objected to or resisted the tenancy conditions and the service plans imposed by the staff. As one resident put it during a focus group, “The major obstacles [of leaving] is that unless you get subsidized or housing somewhere else, you cannot afford to do better than the HHC.”

Residents also said that they felt unable to exercise their voice (Hirschman 1970). While they could file complaints both with the management and with the local housing authority, they indicated in focus groups that they were reluctant to do so for fear of retaliation. A resident stated: “It seems as if you have a grievance against one [property manager], there’s not really a safe way to address it.” Consequently, the residents reported that they were powerless within the organization and had to comply with its rules or face the real possibility of eviction. A resident expressed it this way: “They are in charge. They are giving it to you, and you thank them for that, but it’s under their rules.”

#### **DISCUSSION: THE FAILING OF PROFESSIONAL POWER**

Having mapped and analyzed the power relations among the various stakeholders and the organization, we can now revisit and explain our findings about the diminution of the power of the professional social workers and the dominance of the property managers in the critical decisions about the residents. From a power relations perspective, it becomes apparent that the organization responded to the demands of its dominant stakeholders—equity investors and HUD—by ensuring that its internal practices conformed to these stakeholders’ interests and values. Stakeholders that had little sway over the organization, such as residents and external service providers, had little to no influence over internal organizational practices. Consequently, HHC seemed to prefer residents whose attributes and behaviors would make them good tenants over residents with challenging service needs that the S+C program was originally designed to address. The organization had strong incentives to select and retain residents who would keep their housing units clean, safe, and in good repair; whose apartments would pass the periodic inspections by the local housing authority; who would make it easy to comply with HUD’s rent subsidies; and who would not attract the attention of law enforcement or the media. To do so, its top managers gave greater primacy to property management than to social work when residents failed to comply with these expectations. As a result, in actual practice, when critical decisions had to be made about keeping or rejecting residents who presented behavioral challenges, the middle managers diminished the professional power of the social workers in favor of the property managers.

Our analysis shows that the middle management of HHC became the conduit between the demands of the external stakeholders and the organization's internal practices. To meet the expectations of the equity investors and HUD, middle managers diminished the power of the social workers, even when it meant subverting the organization's stated goal of selecting, retaining, and treating highly vulnerable clients. Then, having neutralized the social workers' professional power, the managers often rationalized evicting residents by pointing to the limitations of social work practices to promptly address residents' behavioral issues. As the associate director of housing put it, "The social workers have an incredible challenge because in the world of treatment in regular social service organizations, people who have behavioral problems but come to an office, you have all the time in the world to deal with them. In this situation if you can't help them move along quickly enough, they are going to get evicted and that's just the way it is." And, as the analysis points out, social work intervention practices seemed to become co-opted and harnessed to support the property managers' sanctions and threats of evictions.

As noted in the analysis, the social workers were cognizant of their loss of power in the critical decisions about their clients, and they acknowledged the primacy of property management. Expressing her frustration that HHC constrained her ability to fully exercise her professional power, a social worker expressed it succinctly: "At the end of the day they [HHC] are mainly [a] housing [rather] than a social service provider. We are more housing than social service." Another social worker stated, "I think they view themselves as a social service provider but first and foremost a property management company." The social workers felt that while HHC claimed to be a social service organization, the political economy and resource dependence of the organization were dominated by stakeholders who were more interested in developing and maintaining low-cost housing. These environmental power imbalances translated into internal practices that limited both the power and discretion of the social workers in favor of the property managers.

#### **LIMITATIONS**

While we believe that a power relations perspective offers a potent explanation of the diminution of the professional power of the social workers, it is possible that alternative organizational theories might offer better or complementary explanations. For example, we could have viewed the conflict

between the social workers and the property managers from an institutional logics perspective (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012). It certainly seems that the social workers and the property managers adhered to very different sets of values and beliefs that were in conflict. Yet, as we explained in introducing our choice of a power relations perspective, the institutional logics perspective deemphasizes the importance of power in shaping organizational structure and practices. Specifically, in the face of conflicting logics, it is not clear which logic would dominate in the environment of the organization because the political economy of that environment is not articulated in the model. Moreover it is unclear from the model which logic would prevail internally in the organization because there is limited attention to the conflicts and competition for power among its internal occupational groups.

Similarly, some elements of street-level bureaucracy may be at play at HHC, particularly in how the property managers used their discretion to cope with residents' behavioral problems with the limited options they had (Lipsky 1980; Brodtkin 2011). The same may be said about the social workers. Yet, the theory does not address the issue of conflict between two different occupational groups and the reasons why one group loses out.

Although the use of a case study to explore the efficacy of a theoretical framework is appropriate, it is only a first step in engaging a power relations perspective in the study of professional power in organizations. It is possible that HHC, while one of the largest permanent supportive housing organizations, had idiosyncratic organizational attributes that may not be applicable to other similar service organizations. The next step could be a comparative case study of similar multi-occupational organizations that are situated differentially in their organizational fields. Such a study would enable an examination of the degree to which variations in the external political economy shape internal organizational power relations, especially when it comes to the professional power and autonomy of social workers in relation to other occupational groups.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our analysis highlights and reinforces a key proposition of the power relations perspective: occupational groups within the organization that have the skills and expertise to better respond to the demands of the more powerful stakeholders in the environment of the organization will acquire

more power compared to other occupational groups who lack these skills and expertise. In the case of HHC, the property managers, in contrast to the social workers, had the skills that were needed to meet the demands of the more powerful stakeholders—HUD and equity investors. Consequently, the professional power of the social workers was appreciably diminished when it came to critical decisions about the clients.

Recognizing that professions such as social work are practiced within an organizational setting implies that the ability of a professional group to exercise its power within the organization will depend on the extent to which its values and practices are endorsed and supported by dominant stakeholders on whom the organization depends for legitimacy and resources. Barring such support, the professional group may lose out to other occupations within the organization that are better positioned to express the interests of the dominant stakeholders. As the case study shows, the relations among occupational groups within the organization are likely to be shaped by organizational managers charged with meeting the organization's objectives and its external demands (Evetts 2013). The organizational leaders in HHC played a pivotal role in shaping the internal structure and practices of the organization in order to adapt and accommodate to the external political economy. As would be expected from a power relations perspective, these strategic adaptations led to significant deviations from the mission and goals of the organization. In the case of HHC, it meant that the mission of the organization, which entailed doing everything possible to keep chronically disabled homeless people housed, was compromised.

Finally, our study explains why the residents, who were key stakeholders, seemed to have little power in the organization. In part, their lack of power can be attributed to the fact that homeless persons are stigmatized as unworthy, and they lack political capital (Schneider and Ingram 1993). Relatedly, the demand for supported housing far outstrips the supply, which gave HHC considerable power over the residents who desperately wanted to avoid eviction. Residents' lack of power over organizational practices meant that they were unable to confer power to the social workers, who were responsible for responding to their interests.

An implication of the power relations perspective is that the professional power of social workers may hinge on the mobilization of other powerful stakeholders to champion the clients' interests within the organization, especially when clients are politically marginalized. For example, powerful stake-

holders such as HUD could articulate and enforce accountability requirements that address the well-being of the clients more directly. Rather than just demonstrating compliance with the social services dollar match, HUD could make the rent subsidies contingent on the ability of HHC to demonstrate that it enrolls and retains the most vulnerable chronically homeless clients. Doing so would align powerful stakeholder interests with client interests, give priority to the social workers and their therapeutic skills, and ensure that the clients, despite their behavioral issues, are not evicted.

Vulnerable clients can obtain power to the extent that they gain social rights, defined by T. H. Marshall (1964, 74) as “the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society.” When clients have fuller social rights, the social work professionals who serve them are better able to exercise their professional knowledge and expertise to safeguard those rights.

#### NOTE

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This study was supported, in part, by a grant from the University of California, Los Angeles, Center for Community Partnerships. The authors wish to acknowledge the insightful comments by the three anonymous reviewers and the editor, which helped to sharpen the focus of this article.

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