

BROKERING LEADERSHIP IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

LIDERAZGO DE INTERMEDIACIÓN EN ENTORNOS COMPLEJOS

INTERMEDIACÃO LIDERANÇA EM ENTORNOS COMPLEXOS

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<p>KEYWORDS: leadership organization environment homeless people</p>	<p>ABSTRACT: This qualitative study, set in the United States, presents an in-depth analysis of leadership in schools and community-based organizations that helped connect students and families to vital education resources. Data were collected from 132 interviews with those who experienced the social and organizational complexities of homelessness. The findings suggest that brokering leadership supports learning, symbolism, identity development, and responsibility. The study indicates that brokering leadership has promise for cultivating opportunities for those who are traditionally disconnected from important resources and relationships.</p>
<p>PALABRAS CLAVE: liderazgo organización entorno personas sin hogar</p>	<p>RESUMEN: Este estudio cualitativo, localizado en Estados Unidos, presenta un análisis en profundidad sobre el liderazgo en escuelas y organizaciones comunitarias que ayudan a conectar a los alumnos y a sus familias con recursos educativos fundamentales. Los datos han sido recopilados a partir de 132 entrevistas con personas que han experimentado las complejidades sociales de la indigencia. Los resultados sugieren que el liderazgo participativo fomenta el aprendizaje, el simbolismo, el desarrollo de la identidad y la responsabilidad. El artículo indica que este tipo de liderazgo promete brindar oportunidades para los desfavorecidos, que no tienen acceso a recursos o relaciones de importancia.</p>
<p>PALAVRAS-CHAVE: liderança organização entornos complexos pessoas sem teto</p>	<p>RESUMO: Este estudo qualitativo, localizado nos Estados Unidos, apresenta uma análise em profundidade sobre a liderança em escolas e organizações comunitárias que ajudam a conectar os alunos e suas famílias com recursos educativos fundamentais. Os dados foram recopilados a partir de 132 entrevistas com pessoas que experimentaram as complexidades sociais da indigência. Os resultados sugerem que a liderança participativa fomenta o aprendizado, o simbolismo, o desenvolvimento da identidade e a responsabilidade. O artigo indica que este tipo de liderança promete brindar oportunidades para os desfavorecidos que não têm acesso a recursos ou relações de importância.</p>

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Introduction

A multitude of leadership studies have been published in recent years across education, business and public sectors. This broad literature on leadership includes both character/attribute analyses and strategy models. However, as intersections among diverse cultures and organizations increasingly merge, more needs to be known about how leadership unfolds in networked fashions. This qualitative study of leadership in an urban community in the Midwestern United States emerges from the contextualist paradigm to describe and examine implications of “brokering leadership” in a dynamic, complex environment.

1. Brokering Leadership and Educational Opportunity

Two concepts—organizational brokerage and opportunity infrastructures—are central to the wider discussion of networked leadership in the field of education. Drawing from sociologist Mario Small (2009), *organizational brokerage* is a practice whereby an organization connects individuals to other people, organizations, and/or opportunities. The practice of brokering is described as especially vital for schools because schools are central – but not exclusive – actors in students’ broader *educational opportunity infrastructures*. In concert with ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), which posits that human development occurs across multiple “systems,” education research clearly delineates that students’ learning and growth is shaped by a wide range of factors, including their home lives, neighborhood/community conditions, school quality, and even historical time period (Author, 2011). Schools have direct impacts on how and what students learn, but these impacts *influence and are influenced by* many other factors. By brokering across developmental systems, schools can cultivate wider educational opportunities and a more just society for all.

Getting beyond a service-provision perspective of leadership – one that examines how school and community leaders can improve only school-based actions and outcomes – recent work indicates that schools and other public organizations have unique brokering potential (Hopson, Miller, & Lovelace, 2016; Scanlan, 2013). Organizations should provide robust services to their consumers, but this can be best accomplished when done with awareness of and integration with the many other factors that affect consumers’ lives. Leaders can catalyze opportunity within and beyond their own organizations’ walls (Spillane, Hopkins, & Sweet, 2015). This organizational brokerage perspective is rooted in understandings that: 1) in most contemporary societies, individuals’ oppor-

tunities and instrumental relationships are most often based in and/or carried out through *organizations* (Small, 2009); 2) leaders’ connective capacities are maximized in organizations that are closely *embedded* with those whom they serve (Author, in press); and 3) *local contexts* affect which organizations have most brokering utility (Sampson, 2012a).

While we have broad understanding that brokering leadership—that which connects people to organizations and resources—is critical to social capital development in organizations and societies, more needs to be known about the specific outcomes of such practice. As such, this study is guided by the following research question: What are the outcomes of brokering leadership practice in a complex, dynamic environment?

2. Conceptual Framework

This study is aligned with the contextualist paradigm of social science research that is largely associated with the Chicago School of Sociology. This approach suggests that social life cannot be understood apart from particular spaces, times, and relations. Abbott (1997) distinguished contextualist research from variable-based paradigms that attribute causal meanings of particular variables “net of other variables” (p. 1152). He explained:

“The Chicago school thought—and thinks—that one cannot understand social life without understanding the arrangements of particular social actors in particular social times and places. Another way of stating this is to say that Chicago felt that no social fact makes any sense abstracted from its context and social (and often geographic) space and social time. Social facts are *located*” (p. 1152).

Situated in this contextualist line of thought, I examine brokering leadership at not just an individual or school level, but in a more holistic fashion as it *affects and is affected by* intersecting micro, meso, and macro-level conditions and factors in a particular setting. I aim to learn how the people, organizations, policies, and larger education-related conditions associated with leadership in a city “hang together” (Sampson, 2012a, p. 23) rather than attempting to “control” them and describe them in relation to a single independent variable.

Some theoretical and methodological cues are garnered from Sampson (2012a; 2012b), whose studies of neighborhoods and cities further social science research in the contextualist paradigm. Sampson (2012b) describes communities, neighborhoods, and the lives that unfold within them as complex systems of “friendship, kinship, and acquaintanceship networks, and formal and informal associational ties

rooted in family life and ongoing socialization processes” (p. 14). Neighborhoods are depicted as places where individuals’ experiences unfold and as “important determinants of the quantity and quality of human behavior in their own right” (Sampson, 2012a, p. 22). In this light, I consider leadership as a multi-level community and organizational brokerage practice.

3. Context

This study was set in Jimdolan¹, a city of about 500,000 residents in the Midwestern United States. Jimdolan is home to a large university, several hospitals, and the headquarters of numerous successful corporations. Jimdolan is a rich context for learning about brokering leadership for three reasons. First, Jimdolan has experienced significant increases in poverty-related challenges in recent years. For example, homeless shelters in Jimdolan served nearly 40% more families and school-age children in 2013 than they did five years earlier and the number of students identified as homeless in the Jimdolan School District (JSD) more than doubled. Poverty factors like homelessness signify the complex social and educational environment of Jimdolan. Second, schools and social services in Jimdolan have purposefully attempted to develop inter-organizational leadership infrastructures to address poverty and resource-related challenges facing the community. Both formally and informally, the community operates through a network of embedded organizational ties that facilitate efficient information sharing and collaboration. Jimdolan has been recognized with numerous awards for this orientation of collective action. Third, Jimdolan is ripe for brokering leadership inquiry because it is enmeshed in an extraordinarily complex social and educational policy environment. The community has embraced progressive reforms in education policy, housing policy, and employment policy. Leaders in these diverse sectors are willing partners in implementing changes that bring about more equitable access to opportunity for all. However, they have struggled to understand the implications of policy as it overlaps across sectors. Leaders in Jimdolan are, as a result, required to develop facility in crossing boundaries to enact change.

4. Design, Data Collection and Analysis

I employed a case study design because I wanted to gain a deep understanding of brokering leadership practice in one bounded context (Creswell, 2002). Case study designs have been employed in other studies of leadership, schools, and communities, including Larson and Meehan’s (2011) comparative description of homeless, mobile, and non-mobile stu-

dents in three school districts and Powers-Costello and Swick’s (2011) analysis of three educators’ collaborative efforts to serve poor students. These case studies drew from multiple forms of data to shed important insights into leadership and schooling.

I wanted to learn about the implications of brokering leadership practice in Jimdolan, so I focused on the complex poverty and homelessness context in the city. I attempted to learn about the results of school and social service leaders’ efforts to connect families and children to education-related opportunities. Given that those experiencing homelessness tend to be charged with identifying many resources and relationships to improve their conditions, brokering practices are especially important to them. My team of graduate students and I conducted 132 semi-structured interviews with wide-ranging school and community leaders and parents of homeless children. The parent participants were identified and contacted through local homeless shelters where they were staying. Case managers and social workers introduced us to parents and we presented them with an overview of the study’s purpose and interview procedures. Most of the parents opted to participate in the study and there were no consequences for the few who did not want to participate.

In addition to parents, we invited JSD’s school social workers—who serve as vital intra- and inter-organizational connectors—and case managers from Jimdolan’s three major shelters to participate in interviews. Additional school and community-based brokering leaders were identified through these interviews (“snowball sampling,” Bryman, 2004) including community-embedded social workers, bilingual resource specialists, and school principals. An overview of the interview participants is provided in Table 1.

Participants were given the option of choosing when and where the interviews would occur. Most of these leaders selected their places of employment or, in the case of homeless parents, the shelters at which they were staying. Interviews were guided by semi-structured protocols that were tailored to the participants’ particular role and/or experience relative to leadership and/or homelessness in Jimdolan. The protocols were informed by empirical literature on brokerage theory. As such, interview questions focused on issues of relationships, information, and resources. Cognitive interviews with several colleagues who were familiar with the field of research on leadership and homelessness helped guide the formation of the interview protocols. Examples of the interview questions include:

- Since you have been here, who and/or what has been most useful in helping your family with school-related matters? (question for parents in shelters)

- What resources does your organization provide to help support students and parents with school-related matters during periods of homelessness? (question for school and community-based workers)
- What other organizations does your organization work most closely with? How do these connections help students/families with school-related matters? (question for school and community-based leaders)
- What outcomes are most common and noteworthy with regard to the relationships that you cultivate within and beyond your organization? (question for all leaders)

Each interview was digitally recorded and then transcribed by the research team. Interview transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo 10. An open coding process helped me to identify themes in the data. I used axial coding to determine how the themes fit together into larger themes. I then considered how the themes related to brokerage theory (Small, 2009).

Participants' Roles	Number of Participants Interviewed
School District Personnel	76
Community Agency Employees	18
Parents	38

5. Findings

I learned about the outcomes associated with brokering leadership in Jimdolan. The context of the study called for connections to be forged in a number of ways and for a variety of purposes related to educational opportunity cultivation for homeless and impoverished families. The families who experienced homelessness in Jimdolan lived in shelters, motels, and in other cramped, temporary spaces that they shared with others. Leaders that supported them were based in schools (principals, social workers, and teachers), social service agencies (case managers, program directors), and non-profit agencies. These leaders connected families with educational opportunities (supplies, relationships, programs, etc.) through both referral and collaboration. Study participants described leaders' work as being conducted both within and beyond their organizational boundaries. In this way, they described "open systems" perspectives of leadership and service—those which carry across sectors and boundaries. They recognized their lead-

ership as being dependent upon and strengthened by the contexts that surrounded them and their interactions with others. We found outcomes associated with this brokering leadership at multiple levels.

5.1. Brokering Leadership and Learning

One of the clearest outcomes associated with leaders' efforts to connect homeless individuals and families with education opportunities was that *multi-level learning occurred*. Homeless families, through their interactions, learned about school-related programs and a wide range of other opportunities in town. Most parents mentioned that they never would have been able to get enrolled in after-school programs, for instance, if their social workers had not helped them to do so. During their experiences of homelessness, parents were so overwhelmed with day-to-day survival issues like housing and food that they did not have the time or energy to make such connections on their own. In this regard, the learning that was facilitated by leaders who helped them was vital. One of the social workers that we interviewed described his work in this regard as an "air traffic controller" who helps people get where they need to be in times of confusion.

We found the learning that occurred through brokerage was not just found in the homeless parents and families, but also in the leaders themselves. In their commitment to being embedded close to issues of poverty and homelessness, social workers, principals, and teachers learned up close about the issues that families were facing. The leaders we studied did not stay in their offices or classrooms, but got out into the hallways, onto the streets, and into the spaces where families lived. They became experts in context. One of the social workers, Dick, a 56-year old man, described some of the learning that he gained as a result of the time he spent working in an impoverished neighborhood:

What's happening right now in Jimdolan is that because of the home foreclosures those families are bumping into, the apartment stock is getting depleted from the top down. And so the people on the bottom tier (economically and socially) who have bad credit histories or criminal histories are getting bumped out (of their apartments).

Dick claimed that he would not have been able to learn about the complexities of housing in the Jimdolan if he did not spend time embedded there in conversations with families and landlords. The effectiveness of these conversations, in fact, convinced him that he needed to spend most of his time on brokerage type practices.

Dick was not alone in his facilities for understanding community narratives. Other leaders built connections based on similar strategies that he employed. One school social worker spent much of her time at a neighboring apartment complex instead of her school office. She forged relationships, and in turn developed deep understanding, as she shared lunch with residents and spoke about opportunity in their neighborhood. When I asked one parent about these kinds of leaders—the kind who focus on connections and relationship development—she told me “they have such a good read on how families are doing.”

5.2. Brokering Leadership and Symbolism

A second major outcome that I found in relation to brokering leadership practice relates to *symbolism*. Many of those who are homeless in Jimdolan have negative histories with the schools and organizations in the community. Some individuals failed out of school and had few positive experiences with other organizations in town as their lives became more deeply affected by poverty and residential instability. They came to see organizations and the leaders who worked within them as non-supporters or even threats. Brokering leaders changed such perceptions in numerous instances. Leaders were present regularly in the spaces where families lived, played, and worked. They developed familiarity and trust with diverse groups. They made the organizations in town more accessible to the homeless and served as welcoming symbols. One community resident told me that before he became familiar with Skippy, one of the community-based leaders that I interviewed, “schools were always, in some ways, kind of this monstrous institution in and of themselves. I think people feel that they can’t break in the doors.” Skippy, however, became a familiar and friendly face of the school. By knowing Skippy, the community resident felt he knew the school. The school, from his perspective, had changed from a monstrous institution to a place that was there to help him and to connect him to other resources in the neighborhood.

One of the social workers that we spoke with, a 46-year old woman named Tootie, said that her brokerage was purposeful and directed at just this type of transformation. Tootie described: “They (leaders who center brokerage) are really aware of the students and their families. They know about siblings and the issues families are facing. They collaborate every day and it’s hands on.” The symbolism associated with brokering leadership, then, had practical accompaniments. It provided cues to those who face daunting social and professional situations that schools and other organizations are not just monolithic bureaucracies, but compositions of people who care for them and can help them.

5.3. Brokering Leadership and Identity

A third major outcome was that, through brokerage leadership practice and everyday embeddedness in neighborhoods, *leaders’ personal and professional identities were crystallized and/or reaffirmed*. The study participants described the differences between brokerage leadership practice—which is characterized by everyday immersion on the front lines of action and is founded upon relationship cultivation—and more traditional bureaucratic leadership that is composed of organizational management and efficiency strategies. In traditional roles, leaders described losing touch with their own professional senses of purpose. They described how their commitments to and passions for work that fueled their early days in the professions of education or social service waned as they gained positional promotions. Essentially, as they had moved up organizational hierarchies, they moved away from the people and issues that meant the most to them and had initially led to their entries into the profession. Brokering centered leadership practices, however, reignited these passions and commitments. Some leaders actually changed positions in order to get back closer to the people and issues they cared about. Others, like school principals, remained in their top-level positions but carved space into their regular schedules that allowed them to be out of the office and face-to-face with families and policymakers beyond their organization’s walls. This was an unanticipated gain of brokerage leadership practice. *Leaders centered connection-making to help others but ultimately helped themselves to remember their deepest commitments*.

A second identity-related outcome also emerged. In relation to the previous finding that brokering leadership provided a symbol of organizations to families, this type of leadership practice allowed homeless families in Jimdolan to better understand the purposes and capacities of specific organizations and leaders. One social worker who we interviewed, a woman named Pamela, described how the immigrant families that she worked with did not understand who she was or the role she played until she came to know them and connect with them:

Sometimes at first they don’t trust me or they think I’m in their business. Sometimes with the title of social worker they think we are with county social services and are going to report them for being neglectful for being homeless. That is why there is some of the reluctance in identifying themselves as homeless. They think that they are bad parents and that I might take the children away from them. There are misperceptions about school social workers and this whole neglect issue.

Pamela spent many days and hours with families and they eventually came to know that her identity as a social worker was not a threatening one. They developed relational trust among each other and she was able to connect them with many resources and relationships in town. She supported students getting into high quality after-school programs, she secured employment opportunities for parents, and she introduced parents to networks of other parents in their schools and apartment complexes. None of these positive outcomes would have been possible if they did not understand her true identity as a person and as a social worker.

In a similar way, one of the most respected leaders that we learned about was Ernesto, a quiet man whose brokerage practices crossed throughout Jimdolan and its diverse organizations. Another local leader described him:

Ernesto is great. He is the contact person. He knows the families and has been here for years. He has ways of getting things taken care of. Utilities. Getting people back in their homes. Dealing with addictions. He knows landlords. He is the person. He knows all the stuff and he knows the families and get things done. He is the first person I call. He knows people at the energy companies. He knows everyone. I know he's screening things and getting down to it.

His identity was well-known because of his years of relationship cultivation and brokering style of leadership.

5.4. Brokering Leadership and Responsibility

The final outcome that I found relating to brokering leadership practice was that it *heightened leaders' senses of urgency and responsibility* in addressing homelessness and supporting families in Jimdolan. School and community leaders' closeness to families and issues of poverty and homelessness brought ongoing immediacy to their work. They understood poverty and homelessness as personal issues that were overwhelming people they knew. Through everyday brokering practices like visits to shelters, conversations with families, and provision of frontline services like the delivery of food and school supplies, they came to see their own work as essential. One school leader, Daniela, provided an example of an interaction that she experienced just before our interview:

I just spoke with a mom who doesn't speak English. She was a domestic violence victim and had all kinds of needs. Becoming a single parent all the sudden with three children, she has financial issues. She has insurance issues. She has language issues. We need translators. She really needs someone to help her navigate.

Daniela said that having this young mother present in her office talking about these issues was difficult, but motivating. By the end of the day, in fact, most of the young mother's immediate needs were addressed through the connections provided by Daniela.

This finding relating to responsibility and urgency, however, was portrayed as also having a negative side. A few of the leaders we spoke with said that they were personally unable to detach from their work and that they suffered significant emotional hardship as a result of their work. Although their closeness to homelessness and its challenges had in fact increased their understanding of how to help families, the leaders were less sure about how their own mental wellness and long-term professional sustainability would be impacted. Numerous leaders broke down into tears as we interviewed them. They claimed that they had learned much in these conditions of hardship and had become more strategic leaders and effective brokers. At the same time, they were afraid of burnout and spillover into their own lives outside of work.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

In sum, I found that brokering leadership practice had a range of positive outcomes in Jimdolan. It facilitated information sharing and learning, it provided important symbols of organizational service and availability, it reaffirmed professional identities, and it increased senses of professional responsibility. In a complex and dynamic environment like homeless services, where policies are regularly changing and families depend on multiple organizations and leaders at the same time, brokering leadership practices emerge as essential. I found a diversity of personalities that engaged in this type of practice—including charismatic extroverts as well as pensive introverts—but found personal characteristics to be less noteworthy than brokering practices and routines in affecting these outcomes.

The study has implications for practice in complex education and social service environments. First, it appears that the notion of *embeddedness* is critical to brokering practice. This embeddedness can be considered in a couple ways. First, those who are embedded in organizations that have brokering orientations can benefit not only from the services provided within a given organization, but also from resources offered by this organization's larger network of contacts. Paralleling Mario Small's (2009) findings about childcare centers, there are a range of "unanticipated gains" that can be gleaned from places that are set up to broker. Students in brokering schools learn about and are connected to people and programs outside of their schools. Families in brokering

shelters derive benefits from their shelter, but also from its organizational partners like libraries, recreation centers, and food pantries. In order for organizations to effectively broker for families and stakeholders, they must themselves be *structurally embedded* within and throughout their communities. The leaders we studied did not remain static within their buildings. They designed ways for regular time spent outside of their own walls. Such embeddedness in apartments, community centers, parks, and other public spaces was not a peripheral option, rather a central component to their work. As such, leaders should consider how their organizations can structurally embed within their own communities.

A second implication that emerges from the study of brokering leadership relates to leadership preparation. Schools and other organizations like shelters and childcare centers often get mired in specialization. Preparation programs aim to develop content experts that can be plugged into these schools and organizations. However, from a brokering perspective, preparation might be reconsidered. Leadership development can and should still drive toward content knowledge and situational expertise. At the same time, relational fluency must be centralized. Leaders must be experts, first and foremost, and listening, learning, and *being with* those whom they serve. Leaders must know how to cultivate understanding

and trust in professional settings, while also developing strategies for maintaining healthy work-life balance. There are common elements to this type of practice, but it is likely to be significantly shaped by the specific contexts in which preparation and practice occur. For example, relational expertise in a small rural community will likely look different than it will in a large urban center. Internships and practicum experiences that are rooted in exposure and site placement beyond university walls, for example, can best lead to this type of expertise development in pre-professional stages. And, in the midst of professional careers (in years beyond formal schooling and preparation), veteran practitioners should continually be challenged by immersions in different environments that can increase their awareness and capacity to serve diverse people.

More research is needed in the area of brokering leadership. Studies that use diverse methods within and beyond the contextualist paradigm to interrogate practices in different sectors are especially useful. How can organizations create space for brokering practice? How can brokering leadership be evaluated? What types of brokerage practices are most necessary amid different types of policy environments? Questions such as these should be pursued toward the furthering of our understandings of leadership in complex environments.

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Notes

¹ Pseudonyms are used for all identifying nouns in the study.

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