The Inter-Organizational Ties That Bind: Exploring the Contributions of Agency-Congregation Relationships*

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Do inter-organizational relationships between religious congregations and social service agencies create bonds that have the capacity to strengthen civil society? Previous research has shown that the provision of social services is one way that congregations contribute to their communities. While some congregations establish their own social service programs, many do not. Instead, they provide services by forming relationships with other organizations. Yet, few studies have examined these relationships to determine whether the institutional bonds that they create encourage individuals to become more engaged in service activities that foster community connectedness. Drawing on interview and survey data collected from social service agencies in one community, this article explores the types of relationships that exist between agencies and congregations. Findings reveal four categories of agency-congregation relationships. Moreover, interview data suggest that inter-organizational partnerships have the most potential for contributing to stronger local civic life.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years scholarly interest in the social service activities of congregations has increased significantly (Chaves 2004; Cnaan, et al. 2002; Grettenberger 2001; Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1993; Silverman 2001; Wineburg 2001). As a result of legislative changes intended to make federal funding more accessible to faith-based social service programs, many researchers have begun to examine the number and types of social services that congregations provide (Ammerman 2001, 2005; Bartkowski and Regis 2003; Billingsly 1999; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001; Cnaan, et al. 2002; Grettenberger 2001; Hill 1998; Dudley and Roozen 2001; Silverman 2001; Wineburg 2001; Wuthnow 2004). Findings from these various studies make it clear that congregations supply a wide range of services to their communities, with programs most often addressing basic

human needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, as well as targeting the needs of youth, children, the elderly, and the disabled (Chaves 2004; Cnaan, et al. 2002). Approximately 90 percent of congregations provide some type of social service to people in their community (Hodgkinson and Weitzman 1993; Dudley and Roozen 2001; Cnaan, et al. 2002).[1]

Often, however, congregations do not attempt to meet community needs on their own. Several national studies indicate that congregations engage in social service provision by supporting the work of other agencies and coalitions (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Dudley and Roozen 2001; Wineburg 2001). Rather than establishing their own programs, many congregations prefer to contribute resources (e.g., money, volunteers, space) to organizations that specialize in the provision of social services (Chaves 2004). In her recent study of congregations and their community partners, Ammerman (2005:160-166) found that 65 percent of congregations have at least one connection to a service organization, and that the average U.S. congregation supports approximately five service organizations with money, space, or volunteers. It is through these sorts of collaborative arrangements that religious congregations most frequently contribute to the provision of social services in their communities.

Few studies have examined these relationships in detail, and those that have do not differentiate between various types of inter-organizational relationships. This article seeks to identify and describe several distinct types of agency-congregation relationships. Additionally, scholarship on collaboration between congregations and community service organizations has neglected to ask how these relationships impact civil society. Do these institutional connections encourage the civic participation of congregation members and facilitate their involvement in wider social networks? Are these relationships capable of strengthening civil society by channeling congregational resources into community programs? This paper begins to answer these important questions by exploring agency-congregation relationships.

RELIGION AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Putnam (2000) expresses concern about declining levels of civic participation in the U.S. and the negative impact that this phenomenon may have on civil society. He theorizes that as Americans become less involved in civic and

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[1]In contrast, the National Congregations Study found that only 57 percent of congregations provide social service programs (Chaves 2004). Discrepancies between Chaves' findings and the findings of other researchers have been attributed to methodological issues (e.g., sampling and interview methods). For a more detailed discussion of these issues see Wuthnow (2004), Cnaan, et al. (2002), and Chaves (2004).

associational life, the informal social networks tying people together in local communities are becoming weaker. Putnam (1996, 2000) argues that a vibrant civic life is important for maintaining democratic society, and that the loss of civil society may have adverse effects on American democracy. As a result, concerned scholars have begun to identify social factors that are capable of contributing to stronger local communities (Putnam and Feldstein 2003; Tolbert, et al. 2002). Religion is one such factor.

Researchers who have studied social capital and civic engagement argue that religious organizations have certain characteristics that give them the capacity to strengthen civil society. Congregations act as civic training grounds, where members have the opportunity to learn civic skills (e.g., public speaking, committee work, meeting organization) that they can use in other social arenas (Verba, et al. 1995). Congregations also possess dense social networks that facilitate civic behaviors such as community volunteerism (Greeley 1997), and they foster bridging social capital that encourages members to become more engaged in their communities (Putnam 2000; Uslaner 2002; Wuthnow 1999, 2002). Bridging social capital consists of social ties between congregation members and individuals outside of the congregation, creating important community connections.

I propose another institutional characteristic that is likely to have an influence on the strength of civil society: congregations' tendency to collaborate with other service organizations. The development of inter-organizational relationships creates the opportunity for congregation members to collaborate with individuals outside the congregation and to become engaged in activities that strengthen the community. Some congregations prefer to support the work of faith-based agencies or coalitions, and a significant research literature has developed that examines these organizations (Ebaugh, et al. 2003, 2005, 2006; Jeavons 1998; Johnson, et al. 2002; Monsma 2000, 2004; Sider and Unruh 2001; Sherman 2003; Smith and Sosin 2001; Unruh 2004). Researchers have investigated the characteristics that make an agency faith-based and the ways that clients and services are affected by the involvement of religion. These organizational studies contribute significantly to our understanding of the types of service agencies that exist and the ways that religious faith manifests itself in the work of those agencies.

Focusing solely on organizational typologies, however, draws attention away from the universal character of agency-congregation relationships, as well as broader questions about how these relationships impact civil society. Inter-organizational relationships exist between congregations and agencies of all types, including faith-based, secular, and governmental service agencies (Ammerman 2005:178-89). Researchers need to examine the variety of ways that congregations relate to other organizations and evaluate whether or not these relationships create social bonds that are capable of strengthening communities.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Previous research has shown that congregations possess valuable social capital, which has the potential to strengthen local communities (Putnam 2000; Verba, et al. 1996; Wuthnow 1999). Yet, few studies have directly examined agency-congregation relationships to determine whether these collaborative ventures tap into that social capital and utilize it in ways that encourage congregation members to develop relationships with individuals and organizations outside of the congregation. Previous studies of agency-congregation collaboration have been most interested in the influence that religion has on the provision of social services (Ebaugh, et al. 2003; Jeavons 1998; Search for Common Ground 2002; Sider and Unruh 2004; Smith and Sosin 2001). I contend, however, that more needs to be known about the various types of inter-organizational relationships that develop between agencies and congregations and whether these relationships are capable of facilitating meaningful community involvement.

The focus of this exploratory study, therefore, is on answering the following research questions: *What are the various types of relationships that develop between social service agencies and religious congregations in local communities? Do these inter-organizational relationships create social bonds that have the capacity to strengthen civil society?*

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

During the fall of 2005 and the spring of 2006, I surveyed and interviewed the executive directors of thirty-one social service agencies in one mid-sized Texas city about the relationships that exist between their organizations and local religious congregations. My sample was purposive, selected to include a variety of agencies that served low-income clients. Initially, I developed a master list of service agencies, compiling data from local social service directories. From this comprehensive list I selected thirty agencies for the study. In selecting specific agencies, I tried to be as representative of the types of agencies located in the local social service sector as possible. This initial list was augmented using snowball sampling techniques (Atkinson and Flint 2001), which allowed me to be inclusive of smaller, more recently established agencies that were not listed in existing service directories. Snowball sampling yielded four additional service agencies. Out of thirty-four agencies that were initially contacted, thirty-one agency directors agreed to participate in the study. Once each director agreed to participate in the study, they were mailed a survey and a face-to-face interview was scheduled. The total sample size for the study was thirty-one, with one director completing only the interview.

Since previous research suggests that congregations collaborate with both faith-based and secular organizations (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004), I includ-

ed faith-based, private non-sectarian, and governmental agencies in the sample. I also selected agencies from the major geographic and socioeconomic areas of the city. Whenever possible I included pairs of faith-based and private non-sectarian service agencies that provided similar services. Table 1 provides descriptive information about the organizations that participated in this study.

The research instruments used were designed to elicit detailed information about the quality and character of the relationships that service agencies had

TABLE 1
Descriptive Information on Local Service Agencies

Agency Type	Primary Service Area	Years Established	Number of Employees	Annual Budget
Private	Community Development	8	1	$0 – 25K
Private	Housing	5	2	$25K – 50K
Faith-based	Healthcare	4	2	$25K – 50K
Faith-based	Families & Children	4	2	$50K – 100K
Faith-based	Housing	5	4	$100K – 200K
Faith-based	Housing	3	2	$100K – 200K
Private	Youth	12	3	$100K – 200K
Faith-based	Job Training	3	2	$100K – 200K
Private	Shelter	12	11	$200K – 500K
Private	Families & Children	---	12	$200K – 500K
Private	Families & Children	44	6	$200K – 500K
Faith-based	Families & Children	3	10	$200K – 500K
Private	Housing	13	7	$500K – 1 million
Faith-based	Housing	20	13	$500K – 1 million
Private	Food	39	73	$500K – 1 million
Private	Food	39	26	$500K – 1 million
Faith-based	Emergency Assistance	20	10	$500K – 1 million
Faith-based	Emergency Assistance	126	70	$500K – 1 million
Private	Healthcare	67	25	$500K – 1 million
Faith-based	Healthcare	22	13	$500K – 1 million
Private	Abuse/Violence	26	27	$1 – 3 million
Private	Abuse/Violence	30	22	$1 – 3 million
Faith-based	Emergency Assistance	14	28	$1 – 3 million
Faith-based	Aging/Elderly	17	33	$1 – 3 million
Government	Housing	---	77	$1 – 3 million
Private	Emergency Assistance	40	325	$3 million or above
Government	Families & Children	---	---	$3 million or above
Faith-based	Families & Children	116	350	$3 million or above
Private	Substance Abuse	37	75	$3 million or above
Private	Youth	17	100	$3 million or above
Private	Substance Abuse	4	2	---

with local congregations. The written survey solicited information about the types of congregational resources that each service agency utilized, how long those resources had been utilized, and what local congregations provided them. Background information was collected about each agency as well as the congregations that it worked with.[2] In-depth interviews were structured and lasted from thirty minutes to an hour. Interview participants were asked a series of questions pertaining to their agency's relationships with local congregations, how those relationships had developed, and how they affected the work of the agency. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

The focus of this exploratory study is on conceptualizing the different types of agency-congregation relationships that exist and determining how these relationships contribute to civil society. Because this is an understudied area, and because these relationships are difficult to identify and measure empirically, my findings are based primarily on the analysis of qualitative interview data. I relied on the stories and experiences of agency directors to address the research questions driving this study. I was particularly interested in the words and phrases that agency directors used to describe the relationships that their organizations had with congregations.

Working inductively from the data, I coded all transcripts looking for emergent themes related to the quality and significance of agency-congregation relationships. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I allowed my work to be informed by the existing research literature on congregational social services and the work of faith-based coalitions (Cnaan, et al. 2002; Ebaugh, et al. 2003; Sider and Unruh 2004; Unruh 2004). Moreover, my interpretation of interview data has been influenced by the theoretical contributions of previous studies. In particular, I looked to previous work on the civic activities of religious organizations (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004; Cnaan, et al. 2002), the functions of faith-based social capital (Ammerman 1997; Bartkowski and Regis 2003), and the mechanisms of boundary maintenance (Becker 1999; Lamont and Molnár 2002) to aid me in determining the appropriate questions to ask as I approached the data and to assist me in interpreting the themes that emerged from the data.

Findings from this study can not be generalized to a larger group of social service agencies in the U.S. or Texas. However, the aim of this study is not to draw conclusions about how all service agencies in every context relate to religious congregations. The aim is to reveal with more clarity the complex and dynamic nature of the relationships that are likely to exist between social service agencies and congregations in local communities.

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[2]Many of the questions included on the survey were drawn from an instrument developed by researchers studying congregational social service involvement in Greensboro, North Carolina (Wineburg 2001).

AGENCY-CONGREGATION RELATIONSHIPS

Congruent with previous studies of congregational social services (Wineburg 2001; Cnaan, et al. 2002), my interviews with service agency directors revealed high levels of cooperation between agencies and congregations. Twenty-eight (90 percent) of the directors I interviewed indicated that their agency had developed at least one relationship with a local congregation, and twenty-four (77 percent) reported having relationships with two or more congregations. I define relationships as any ongoing interaction between a service agency and a congregation that results in the regular contribution of congregational resources to the work of the agency.

While the focus of the current study is on examining collaborative relationships between congregations and service agencies, it should be noted that four agencies (13 percent) did report having antagonistic relationships with at least one congregation. Directors in these agencies told me that their organizations had taken a public stand on certain moral and political issues (e.g., abortion, sex education, or homosexuality) that had angered some local congregations. Moreover, several agency directors expressed unease about the religious motivations of the congregations that they worked with. They raised concerns that some congregations try to use service involvement as an opportunity to proselytize agency clients. The director of one faith-based service agency told me that congregational volunteers "more often than not will be pretty hyper-evangelical. So, they come in with a mindset that we're going to go down and get those poor black kids saved, you know? And we reject that as a mindset. We don't push. We don't even really allow group evangelism." Despite the existence of a few antagonistic relationships, most agency directors reported positive interactions with congregations. Nevertheless, future research should pay closer attention to the effects that antagonistic relationships have on service agencies and civic life more generally. The focus of the present study, however, is on the more positive collaborative relationships that exist between service agencies and congregations. My survey and interview data indicate that there are several distinct ways in which agencies relate to congregations.

Using a classification scheme similar to those used by other organizational researchers (Search for Common Ground 2002; Unruh 2004), I organized agency-congregation relationships into four separate categories. Four questions guided my analysis of interview data and assisted me in conceptualizing these categories: *How independent are the organizations in each relationship (and could they continue to provide services without the relationship)? Do organizational boundaries remain distinct in the relationship? What is the level of interaction that occurs between the agency and the congregation in each relationship? Which organization was responsible for initiating the relationship?* Table 2 below illustrates how these questions were used to conceptualize categories.

TABLE 2
Agency-Congregation Relationship Categories

	Wedded	Partnership	Adoptive	Functional
How independent are the organizations in each relationship?	Dependent	Interdependent	Independent	Independent
Do organizational boundaries remain distinct in the relationship?	Indistinct	Distinct	Distinct	Distinct
What is the level of interaction between the agency and congregation?	High	High	Low	Low
Which organization was responsible for initiating the relationship?	Either	Either	Congregation	Agency

It is important to note that while relationship categories are mutually exclusive, individual agencies' styles of relating to congregations are not. Most agencies reported having relationships with multiple congregations at the same time, and each one of these relationships might be of a different type. For instance, an agency might be involved in an elaborate partnership with one congregation and have a more limited relationship with another congregation at the same time. Rather than identifying *types of agencies* or *types of congregations* this study explores the *types of relationships* that exist and how those relationships affect civil society. It should be noted that this typology is not intended to be exhaustive; there are likely relationships that fall outside of the four categories.

Wedded Relationships
The first category that I identify is *wedded relationships*. These relationships are characterized by dependency. In a wedded relationship, a social service agency is linked to a particular congregation so intimately that it becomes dependent or nearly dependent upon that congregation in order to provide services. Several directors I interviewed told me that their service programs would not exist without the congregations to which they related. This type of statement indicated that an agency was involved in a wedded relationship. These were not common. Only four (13 percent) of the agencies were involved in these highly dependent relationships. For these agencies, however, the relationship was a

necessity. It animated and sustained certain service programs, providing needed resources such as money and volunteers.

In wedded relationships dependency is accompanied by close identification with one particular congregation and the maintenance of very low boundaries between the agency and that congregation. In the field, this occasionally made it difficult to determine precisely where the service agency ended and the congregation began. Shared resources, staff and identity contributed to these indistinct organizational boundaries. Even directors had difficulty explaining the boundaries that separated agency from congregation. One representative of an agency that provided emergency financial assistance to families in need tried to explain the relationship that her agency had with a congregation this way: "We are [part of the] church. However, our offices are completely separate from our church. … But, I worship at the church, and I am the director of social services. So, I tie them in very closely." Wedded relationships create a feeling among agency and congregation representatives that the two organizations are really one.

In wedded relationships there is a steady flow of resources and communication back and forth between agency and congregation representatives as the two organizations work together to provide a service. For example, in one agency that provided mentoring to families and children all programs were staffed entirely by volunteers from a single congregation. On paper, the agency and congregation existed as separate legal entities, but in day-to-day interactions they related to one another in such a way that the organizational boundaries became indistinct. The annual budget of another service agency that provided shelter and food to people in need consisted almost exclusively of financial contributions from one single congregation. It should not be surprising that all of the agencies that engaged in wedded relationships identified themselves as faith-based agencies, given their dependence upon religious congregations.

Partnerships

The second relationship category is *partnerships*. These relationships are characterized by mutuality and cooperation between agencies and congregations. There is a growing inter-disciplinary literature on collaborations that helped me to conceptualize this type of relationship (Longoria 2005; Oliver 1990; Reitan 1998). A partnership is formed when an agency and a congregation agree to work closely with one another to provide a service. In partnerships, both organizations invest resources in, and share ownership of, the services that are being offered. The collaborative and interdependent nature of these relationships requires high levels of interaction between agency and congregational representatives. Still, organizational boundaries remain more distinct in these relationships than boundaries in wedded relationships. This is due to the fact that partnerships are typically brokered through a formal agreement.

Fifteen (48 percent) of the service agencies that I studied were engaged in partnerships with local congregations. These partnerships supported a number of

community services including a community feeding program, a shelter for women and children, and a program that helped low-income residents access affordable housing. Services provided through partnerships benefit both the service agencies and the congregations that they partner with by helping them to accomplish certain aspects of their own organizational missions.[3] In partnerships, both organizations are able to accomplish things more easily than they would be able to individually.

One faith-based service agency reported partnering with eight congregations in order to provide healthcare services to uninsured clients. The service agency had a professional staff and the technology to help a limited number of clients on their own. By forming partnerships with local congregations, however, the agency gained access to the volunteer labor, physical facilities, and social networks of those congregations. These partnerships allowed the agency to increase its services and expand its client base in the community. The agency director told me that partnerships allowed his agency to share resources in a way that made its services more effective.

The formality of agency-congregation partnerships varied. Some service agencies required a written agreement before establishing a partnership, while others relied on verbal agreements with congregation members. Half of the agencies engaged in partnerships with congregations reported having some type of document or contract that spelled out each organization's responsibilities within the relationship. These agreements gave partnering organizations a clearer understanding of their various roles in the relationship and aided each organization in maintaining boundaries and a distinct identity within the relationship.[4] The director of one faith-based agency that partnered with several congregations in order to run a variety of social service programs described his agency's agreement this way: "With the churches we call them covenant agreements, and basically it's a contractual relationship. … It outlines roles, responsibilities, at some level expectations. It outlines liability issues. It outlines insurance issues, outlines some employment issues, just the basics in terms of what would need to be understood."

Partnerships were reported by faith-based and private service agencies alike. Most often, when private secular agencies partnered with a local congregation, it was to provide a particular service or program. In contrast, the partnerships

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[3] I did not interview congregational representatives about the benefits that these relationships provided to them. However, agency directors often told me about the benefits that they believed congregations received from the relationships.

[4] Different agencies had different names for these agreements, reflecting their various approaches to faith involvement. For example, some agencies that considered themselves faith-based drew on religious language and described agreements as "covenants." Other agencies simply referred to agreements with congregations as "contracts" or "memorandums of understanding" much like agreements that they would have with any other type of organization.

between faith-based agencies and congregations tended to be more comprehensive. Faith-based agencies might partner with congregations to provide an entire slate of service programs.

Adoptive Relationships

The third category is *adoptive relationships*. In an adoptive relationship, a service agency is granted access to congregational resources without having to ask for it. Through these relationships, local congregations proactively seek ways to contribute to the work of service agencies in their community. Adoptive relationships were as common among the agencies that I studied as partnerships. Fifteen (48 percent) of the directors I interviewed indicated relating to at least one congregation this way. The directors generally spoke of being adopted or being "taken on as a project" by a local congregation. The way that these relationships function, however, varied from situation to situation. Some congregations regularly provided in-kind gifts such as food and clothing that could be used by clients, while others provided volunteer labor or resources that the agency needed. A variety of tangible and intangible congregational resources flowed to service agencies through these relationships.

Adoptive relationships are characterized by informality and low levels of agency investment. They allow agencies and congregations to maintain distinct organizational boundaries and require low levels of interaction. Several directors reported that informal relationships had formed rather serendipitously when someone from a local congregation had contacted them to offer support. A few agencies reported that congregations contacted them with some particular contribution already in mind, while most reported that congregations had simply asked what they could do to help. The director of a substance abuse treatment center humorously admitted to me that several local congregations provided more volunteers than his agency needed. However, he told me that they were more than happy to try to find work for them. The director of a crisis pregnancy center told a similar story about congregations contributing diapers and baby supplies that were not needed. These relationships provide ongoing support with limited congregational interaction.

One of the most distinct characteristics of adoptive relationships is that they are always initiated by congregations and most often by some smaller group within a congregation such as a Sunday school class or a mission group. Interview data indicate that these relationships tend to be the result of a group of congregation members becoming interested enough in the work of a service agency to offer their support. In this way, adoptive relationships represent a unique opportunity for individual congregation members to become more involved with groups of people external to their own congregation. Despite the informality of these relationships and the low levels of organizational interaction engendered by them, adoptive relationships do create ties between congregation members and community service organizations.

Agency directors told me that they had done little to engage congregations initially and generally did very little to maintain these relationships. In fact, the director of a women's shelter that received regular support from three local congregations said about maintaining these relationships, "Every once in a while they'll call us. Like right now one of the mission ladies keeps asking me about needs, and they send me a hundred dollars to buy pots and pans, and just little things like that. So they're there, and I don't solicit them. They keep coming up saying … what do you need?" These informal relationships are ongoing, rather than one-time service projects. Similar to the comment above, the director of a governmental agency that works primarily with families and children had this to say about the congregations that they related to: "Their mission program brings care packages about every six months…. They just called and said we would really like to do something, tell me some of your needs. I told them several things and that's the one they chose."

While adoptive relationships were reported by all types of service agencies, this phenomenon occurred more commonly among the private and governmental agencies that I studied. It is not clear why these relationships were more common among private and governmental agencies. I suggest, however, that it may be a result of faith-based agencies' more proactive stance toward developing agency-congregation relationships. The faith-based agencies in my sample often pursued relationships with congregations while the directors of private and governmental agencies were not as intentional about pursuing relationships with congregations. They typically allowed congregations to approach them or waited until a particular need arose before seeking congregational support. There is no evidence to suggest that local congregations targeted private or government agencies.

Functional Relationships

The fourth category is *functional relationships*. Functional relationships are limited relationships that a service agency establishes with a congregation in order to access some specific congregational resource that the agency needs. In contrast to adoptive relationships, which are initiated by members of a congregation, functional relationships develop when service agencies approach congregations to ask for assistance. Functional relationships were the single most common type of relationship reported by service agencies. Seventeen (55 percent) of the agencies I studied reported having this type of relationship with congregations. When agencies needed volunteers for a particular service program or needed to locate funds to assist a client in need, they would turn to local congregations to meet those needs.

Functional relationships are characterized by informality and low levels of interaction. One important way that these relationships differ from adoptive relationships is the relative lack of involvement by ordinary congregation members. Interview data reveal that these relationships rarely create opportunities for

interaction between congregation members and agency staff or clients. In seeking assistance from local congregations, agency directors indicated that they dealt most commonly with congregational leaders and staff members. These relationships are unlikely to create inter-organizational ties that mobilize individual congregation members.

Additionally, the congregations that agencies reported utilizing were not actively seeking to be used, but were willing to provide a variety of resources when asked. One director of a faith-based agency that provided emergency assistance and shelter to homeless clients described the nature of functional relationships very succinctly when she said, "I feel that it's more us asking them [congregations] than them truly seeking to say hey we're available for this service." Nevertheless, agency directors maintained that these relationships provided a variety of resources and were very important to the work of their organizations.

The director of a private non-profit agency that provides counseling and social services to children and their families reported that his agency relies on functional relationships with congregations to meet many of their clients' needs: "Our folks … become experts at resources and knowing [where resources are]. You know, their job is to connect clients with resources in the community, and so it's not unusual for them to know that there's a church in the neighborhood … that has a food closet or will occasionally help out with the electric bill." Sometimes agencies solicited resources from congregations on their own behalf, but most often agencies developed functional relationships with congregations in order to locate assistance for their clients. It was common for agency directors to report that they had a history of relying on the same few congregations whenever they had clients with particular needs. Over time, these agencies had established a *de facto* relationship with several congregations that they knew would help their clients. One agency director put it this way: "These are the [congregations] that we have a working relationship with and apparently they have in their budget helping our people, because [an agency worker] goes several times a month to different [congregations]. Every month there's someone who needs rental assistance. … He has these working relationships with these churches."

Occasionally these functional relationships developed out of an agency representative's own personal or congregational social networks. Agency directors reported going to their own congregation or to a staff member's congregation to request assistance. This finding is consistent with recent scholarship that has shown how the social capital of service agencies and service workers may benefit clients (Livermore and Neustrom 2003; Lockhart 2005). The director of a private nonprofit agency told me the story of how his own congregation initially became involved in the work of his organization: "I actually went to my own church, and we kind of made a wish list that, you know, that we put up and asked folks to take stuff. … and so the folks from the congregation gave different kinds of school supplies and art supplies and stuff just to kind of have a start, kind of a start up point

for the after school program. That's the first time we'd ever done really anything like that."

Almost every agency director that I spoke with expressed the sentiment that local congregations were rich in resources that their agencies could use. When agency staff members encountered community members in need and did not know where else to turn for help they often relied upon the functional relationships that their agencies had with local congregations. Not surprisingly, then, the involvement of religious congregations in social service provision is widespread. Agencies of all types, from faith-based to governmental service agencies, reported building relationships with congregations that aided them in providing services to community members. What varied were the types of relationship that were built between congregations and social service agencies. Other than wedded relationships—which were found only among faith-based agencies—no particular category of relationship was peculiar to any type of agency. However, there is some indication that faith-based agencies may be more comfortable engaging in more interactive agency-congregation relationships, while private and governmental agencies may be more likely to engage congregations at arms length. These patterns are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Relationships Reported by Local Service Agencies

	Wedded	Partnership	Adoptive	Functional	None
Faith-Based (n = 13)	4	9	5	4	0
Private Non-Profit (n = 16)	0	6	8	11	3
Governmental (n = 2)	0	0	2	2	0
% of Agencies Reporting	13%	48%	48%	55%	10%

Note: The total number of relationships is greater than the total number of service agencies because agencies were allowed to report multiple types of congregational relationships.

IMPACT ON CIVIL SOCIETY

The current study indicates that agency-congregation relationships positively affect local communities in a number of ways. They are capable of creating organizational ties that broaden local networks of caring and contribute to a vari-

ety of social service programs. These relationships also create institutionalized avenues that allow congregations to more easily invest the human, social, and financial capital that they have into local social service efforts. For instance, twenty-two (71 percent) of the directors I spoke with indicated that they received congregational funding to support their programs through these relationships, and twenty-one (67 percent) said that they utilized volunteers coming from local congregations. In addition, the presence of these relationships increases the number and quality of social services that are likely to be present in a community. Most agency directors told me that without these relationships their efforts to serve people would be less effective. One director of a faith-based program that assisted clients in purchasing affordable housing put it this way: "I just don't see how any nonprofit could get around dealing with churches because that's just going to be the backbone of any volunteer effort, you know. … I can't help it if the churches are going to be the majority of resources; it's just going to be. I think it's always been that way."

Civil society literature, however, maintains that strong communities and societies are created by fostering dense social networks that contribute to improved community functioning and high levels of individual civic engagement. In order to determine what impact various agency-congregation relationships have on the strength of civil society, it is necessary to investigate whether or not they foster social ties that make it easier for individuals to become engaged in their communities. Data from the current study indicate that some agency-congregation relationships are more likely to foster these sorts of ties than others.

My findings indicate that communities stand to benefit the most from the establishment of *partnerships*. These relationships represent the formation of thick, durable ties between an agency and a congregation that are capable of getting congregation members more involved in their community. Frequent interaction and communication between partnering organizations creates regular opportunities for individual members to become significantly engaged in service work. These relationships bring congregation members into close interaction with agency staff and their clients, creating social ties that connect congregation members to a wider community. In addition, the process of getting involved through partnerships can be transformative for many congregation members. One agency director explained the way that these relationships affect some congregation members: "One of the best things that happens here is they're uncomfortable for however long. You can't be here very long and not be face to face with the prejudices, and so they have the opportunity then to work through their prejudices to ask the questions and come out on the other side in a place of transformation, and that's just been important. They're profoundly affected."

The maintenance of partnerships requires dialogue between congregations and service agencies about specific community needs and the services that the two organizations provide together. Shared responsibility for these service programs suggests a high level of commitment on the part of congregational repre-

sentatives. Partnerships encourage congregation members to take ownership of the service programs that they are involved in. One director of a faith-based agency that provides emergency assistance to low-income clients told me, "We have to bring churches along with us, and so we became a whole lot more intentional about [not] just asking them to give us money for our programs, but to really come be a part of it with us. So, for the last ten or so years we've been working hard to develop those relationships with churches, and I think probably stand pretty strong in that."

In these relationships, congregations do more than simply assist service agencies in their work; they become a part of that work. These relationships create opportunities for community organizations to deal with community problems together. This is a type of collaboration that contributes to civil society as it encourages individual congregation members to become more intimately involved in service provision.

Because *functional relationships* represent a much more limited style of interaction between agency and congregation representatives, they have less of an impact on civil society. This type of relationship is characterized by thin inter-organizational ties that function primarily as a means to an end: accessing resources to meet immediate needs. When service agencies in these relationships request financial support from a local congregation or seek volunteers to help with a service program, they tend to interact with a few isolated members of those congregations. These relationships do introduce congregations to the work of service agencies. However, they do little to integrate individual congregation members more fully into that work. Functional relationships do not typically bring large numbers of congregation members into contact with agency staff and clients in a way that might compel them to become more engaged in service provision. In fact, other than a few instances in which service agencies requested congregational volunteers, most of the functional relationships I observed involved only one or two congregational representatives, and these were most often staff members.

Functional relationships do not contribute to civil society in the same way that partnerships do. They do not create thick ties between agencies and congregations, but instead rely on loose connections (Wuthnow 1998). It would be inaccurate to assume that these relationships are of no benefit to local communities. My interviews with agency directors indicate that these relationships provide significant assistance and connections that create the potential for more significant collaboration in the future. Like the strength of weak interpersonal ties (Granovetter 1973), thin institutional ties may help tie a community together. Nevertheless, these connections do less to integrate congregation members into the work of community service provision than partnerships.

Like functional relationships, *adoptive relationships* are also characterized by low levels of agency-congregation interaction and thin inter-organizational ties. As a result, adoptive relationships also offer less potential than partnerships for

mobilizing congregation members for community involvement. I contend, however, that the interactions that do occur in these relationships hold more promise than those in functional relationships because they are generally the result of congregational initiative and are more likely to involve individual congregation members. These relationships are more likely than functional relationships to introduce church members to the work and the needs of local service agencies. However, these relationships do not create the sort of thick ties that partnerships create, propelling congregation members into regular community involvement.

Wedded relationships are unique among the types of agency-congregation relationships that I have identified because of the dependency that they foster between organizations. These highly interactive and dependent relationships make it possible for some agencies to provide social services that they would otherwise be unable to provide. In this way, wedded relationships certainly contribute to community needs being met. Without them some social service programs would probably not exist. In addition, wedded relationships do create opportunities for individual congregation members to interact with agency staff and clients, which would seem to be a bridging function.

My data, however, suggest that these relationships link community organizations in a way that blurs organizational boundaries. Agencies and congregations engaged in wedded relationships tend to act as one rather than as two organizations. As a result, congregational involvement in service provision through these relationships actually requires less bridging social capital than involvement through other types of relationships. In talking with agency directors, I got very little sense that wedded relationships represented a connection across social or religious differences. Wedded relationships develop between organizations that see themselves as being cut from the same institutional cloth in many respects. For this reason, I suggest that congregational volunteers working in an agency that is wedded to their own congregation do not represent bridging social ties in the same way that congregation members volunteering in a separate service agency would.

CONCLUSIONS

Previous studies have found that U.S. congregations sometimes contribute to their communities by establishing supportive relationships with social service agencies and charity organizations (Ammerman 2005; Wineburg 2001; Wuthnow 2004). Through these collaborative arrangements congregations provide space, volunteers, money, and in-kind gifts to local agencies that exist to meet a variety of human needs. For many congregations, it is more convenient to support the work of these organizations than to establish their own service programs or community ministries. But do the relationships that develop between congregations and local service agencies actually link individual members with

the wider community in ways that contribute to a stronger, more vibrant civil society?

Findings from the current study indicate that some of these relationships do, in fact, draw congregation members into the wider community. Nevertheless, not every agency-congregation relationship contributes to community connectedness or civil society equally. Interview and survey data reveal the existence of at least four types of agency-congregation relationships: wedded relationships, partnerships, adoptive relationships, and functional relationships. While all of these relationship types benefit service agencies and communities to some extent, only partnerships create thick institutional ties that have the capacity to move individual congregation members into wider community involvement. The mutual responsibility and commitment that is fostered in these relationships suggests that they have the capacity to mobilize congregation members in a way that other relationships do not. Unlike partnerships, functional relationships and adoptive relationships create relatively thin ties between agencies and congregations that are less likely to sustain connections between congregation members and wider community service networks. In contrast, wedded relationships develop thick social ties that actually bond agencies and congregations together. These relationships are less likely to propel congregation members into wider community networks than they are to provide avenues of involvement that keep members close to their own congregation. I contend, therefore, that partnerships are the type of agency-congregation relationship that has the most potential for contributing to civil society.

The results of this study have important implications for future research and for debates surrounding levels of civic engagement in the U.S. In recent years, a great deal of scholarly attention has been given to the influence that religion has on civic participation and the health of local communities (Tolbert, et al. 2002; Wuthnow 1999). In fact, some observers see civically engaged religion as an antidote for the declining levels of civic participation that seem to plague the U.S. Findings from this study suggest, however, that research on the contributions that religion makes to civil society needs to pay closer attention to the quality of agency-congregation relationships. It is just as important to know *how* a congregation relates to community organizations as it is to know *whether* a congregation relates to those agencies. A congregation may give large amounts of money to a local charity and never motivate individual members to become more engaged in the life of the community. Future congregational research should seek ways to measure individual members' involvement in bridging service activities. This could be accomplished through the use of congregational surveys that ask individual members about their civic behaviors (see Woolever and Bruce 2002) or through the completion of detailed ethnographic studies of civically engaged congregations.

Additionally, any practical effort to shore up civil society by developing policies and programs to strengthen local communities should consider the potential

that inter-organizational partnerships have for creating valuable bridging social capital. The findings from this study suggest that sustained interaction between congregation members and service agencies is possible when partnerships are created. These types of collaborations are capable of drawing individual congregation members who possess valuable social capital out of isolation and into relationships with other members of the community. Developing more community programs that involve members from local congregations as well as representatives from civic groups and service agencies is one way that policy makers and congregational leaders could strengthen weak social networks within their community.

It needs to be reiterated that the data from this study are not representative of agency-congregation relationships in all American communities. Nevertheless, the findings highlight the complexity and importance of these relationships and suggest a framework that can be used by other researchers to categorize these relationships. We need to know more about agency-congregation relationships and their capacity to mobilize congregational members for collective action, to shape civic discourse within congregations, and to bring about social change in communities. These issues are beyond the scope of the current study and would require the observation of both congregations and their service partners. It is clear, however, that agency-congregation relationships create institutional connections in local communities that have great potential for increasing civic participation and strengthening civil society. The impact of these relationships needs to be understood more fully.

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