Commentary

These comments relate to the articles in this Cityscape *symposium by Basolo, by Skobba and Goetz, and by Oakley, Ruel, and Reid.*

Acknowledging the Structural Features of Choice

Sudhir Venkatesh
Columbia University

The orderly way in which we present research certainly belies the roundabout way in which insights are obtained. Some years back, in the middle of my study on Chicago public housing transformation, an elderly tenant withdrew from my study. She said that my interview was making her depressed. She decided to stop the interview just as I had completed about 30 of the 60 questions in my hand. She shook her head and said—

> *I've had enough. You keep asking me about what I want, what my choice is, what's going to happen. I don't see how any of this will be helpful.*

I explained (for the second time) what was written on my informed consent form—the form that I would read to ensure that respondents understood the purpose of my visit. I said slowly that we were interested in the decisions that poor families made as they entered the private market after years in public housing. If they had a *choice*, I said, would they choose to live in better off neighborhoods? It seemed like a reasonable question, until I heard her answer.

> *It's not about what we choose to do. Any fool can make choices, but you want to know the difference between you and me? When you make a bad decision, it won't matter. You'll be fine. See, when poor folk make choices, it can go terribly wrong. Terribly wrong. You want to help us? Make it so it doesn't matter if we make a bad choice.*

In that instant, I understood how much my own scholarly approach was based on untested and unexamined assumptions about the social world: choice mattered to me because most of my choices were not life or death. If my basic choices carried great weight, I would feel burdened and anxious. Residential location is a perfect example: I am fortunate to be able to live in a variety of middle-class neighborhoods, with varying amenities. I have some choice. Then again, I am not considering gang turf boundaries, lack of hospitals and grocery stores, police neglect, or anything else that really affects my material welfare. Every neighborhood *I choose* comes with these amenities. In other words, not much choice exists at all.

For poor residents, choices are grave matters and the process can be tiresome after a point. Moving year after year, worrying about gun violence or the availability of decent public transportation, and getting children into a new school are all deeply anxiety-provoking, energy-consuming activities.

Our approach to housing policy should take into account this structural feature of choice. The articles by Victoria Basolo, by Deirdre Oakley, Erin Ruel, and Lesley Reid, and by Kimberly Skobba and Edward G. Goetz remind us just how important choices are for low-income families. These articles challenge us to consider the forces that propel families into stability or lurch them over the cliff further into impoverishment. They also point to novel ways to better equip families to organize their lives in efficacious ways.

In the articles, I found several lines of argument—all rooted in careful empirical analysis—that are worth pursuing as we reflect on the future of housing policy for low-income households seeking to live in more economically and socially mixed areas.

First, social networks are critical for the poor urban residents, but the networks also provide contradictory benefits. They can facilitate comfort and security, but they also anchor individuals and their families in ties that are difficult to leverage for material benefits—such as information about jobs, schools, and safe neighborhoods.

Oakley, Ruel, and Reid write, "being older and from housing for seniors, having a disability, experiencing financial strain, and living a longer time in public housing decreased the probability of experiencing an easy relocation process." Their findings suggest that public housing residence has a temporal quality in which aspects of one's lifestyle become difficult to overcome. The longer one stays in a housing development, the more likely that one's personal connections affect the relocation and choice process. One will be influenced by others in a social network; or, more commonly, one may be in networks of monetary indebtedness that make it difficult not to follow those whom one has been relying on for support in dire times. Conversely, familiar faces can help ease the burden precisely for these reasons. Oakley, Ruel, and Reid find, "Those who experienced an easy relocation also were significantly more likely to move into neighborhoods where at least 12 others from our sample moved."

Skobba and Goetz echo this point regarding relationships.

> Relationships, rather than neighborhoods, appeared to be the driving factor in residential mobility and decisionmaking for the low-income families in our study. In the absence of financial resources, people are an essential source of capital. For very low-income households, support networks become an important way for families to meet basic needs. The use of informal support networks to meet housing needs is no exception. … *Sometimes, supportive relationships with parents and friends offered stability and security even when housing conditions were less than ideal* (emphasis added).

The Skobba and Goetz article reminds us not to view social networks as a panacea—social ties are limited as catalysts for change. They present a careful, grounded portrait of the residents in their sample for whom social networks served as a resource (and possibly a constraint). Their work suggests that improving the ties of low-income households through mobility is important, but that it is never a direct outcome of residential relocation.

Basolo's analysis of families who relocated in Orange County highlights an issue that is often under-emphasized in mobility research: larger metropolitan areas typically receive the greatest scholarly attention, which can be a determinant to creating a nuanced understanding of how housing choice can affect household welfare across the country. Focusing on a complex region in which several midsize urban and suburban spaces are strung together, Basolo in her research reminds us of the importance of measured expectations in mobility research. Change neither comes right away, nor to the degree that policymakers would like to see happen.

Voucher holders' locational choices in Orange County and elsewhere may be constrained to a limited number of relatively similar neighborhoods. In other words, moving would not change outcomes dramatically. Such an interpretation about the lack of differences between Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP) movers and nonmovers is consistent with the results comparing mover-only outcomes before and after their residential relocation. Although there were improvements in the neighborhood poverty rate and school quality, they were quite small. As such, it is reasonable to suggest these marginal changes likely have no discernible positive effects on the lives of voucher holders or their children.

Context matters, as Basolo makes clear. The relevant context could include the dynamics of the housing market and the administrative capacities of the agencies delivering assistance and services to families. Basolo's measured views on this subject are highly welcomed, given the outsized hopes that many of us have for voucher-based programs.

> The burden for HCVP administrators is to work on opening up new neighborhoods that offer more opportunities to voucher holders, although doing so is a tall order for LHAs that have struggled in the past convincing landlords to accept voucher recipients.

Skobba and Goetz articulate a point that is also not emphasized enough in studies of housing mobility. "For very low-income households, residential mobility is more often an exercise in improvisation than planned." Their corrective is necessary for scholars and policymakers who too often construct housing policy based on a search procedure that resembles a middle-class flowchart: check the classified ads, make an appointment, visit a few places, choose a home. Such searches are typically portrayed as an emotionally unremarkable activity, except for the motivation to flee one's existing neighborhood. Whereas, in reality, the attachments that low-income households have to one another and to their community mitigates against any such smooth linear process.

> The findings from our study suggest that very low-income households use different, often unconventional, strategies to find housing. The process prioritizes convenience and necessity rather than being a choice among housing units that match a predetermined set of criteria. The reason for this is probably twofold. First, forced moves often leave little time to conduct a thorough housing search. Second, the affordability problems that our study families faced put market rentals out of reach.… The experiences of the participants in our study suggest that very low-income households rely on personal relationships, rather than a formal housing search process, to find a place to live.

One general and consistent theme in the articles is that the move to a low-poverty neighborhood does not necessarily produce higher levels of satisfaction for movers—whether the movers are

voucher holders or nonvoucher holders. This point sounds nearly heretical in today's discourse, given the core policy assumption that poor neighborhoods are places to *leave*—and quickly. The trouble with this view is that a limit exists in terms of a society's capacity to use "exit" as social policy. Skobba and Goetz are clear on this issue.

> Forced relocation out of communities and into opportunity neighborhoods is especially insensitive to the necessary social supports that low-income families construct and maintain. This insensitivity is especially true of programs in which displacement and relocation are typically the only intervention experienced by needy families, a fact that has been true of most public housing redevelopment efforts.

At some point, realistic housing policy would suggest that we adopt a neighborhood-level focus in which low-income families are given the services necessary to live comfortably and safely in their existing area. In our silo-based approach to social policy, however, such nonhousing matters can easily be shuttled off to the next agency or scholarly conference. This result would be a pity, because as the three articles intimate, if the problems are complex, such that multiple factors are brought together, then it seems that the solutions might necessarily need to be organized in such a manner as well.

Acknowledgments

Author

Sudhir Venkatesh is the Williams B. Ransford Professor of Sociology at Columbia University.