Defying the Downturn: A Case Study of Organizational Field Differences in Food Security and Affordable Housing Organizations

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Abstract

Exogenous shocks may shake the structure and relationships in organizational fields, creating opportunities to study their dynamics and how their structure, history, and funding impact opportunities for innovation, change and influence in the field. Less research has focused on organizational fields within the nonprofit sector and the particular importance of interactions and relationships for field dynamics within it. This qualitative case study investigates how two types of social service organizations, food security and affordable housing, respond to uncertainty in their organizational fields, particularly in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Following organizational sociology’s study of fields, I explore how the affordable housing and food security fields’ different historical development and funding structures impact their current responses to an economic downturn. I find that affordable housing organizations’ less centralized local funding structure and opportunities for program and funding diversification make them more adaptable to uncertainty than food security organizations. This study can help researchers to understand more thoroughly how organizational fields operate in the heterogeneous nonprofit sector.
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Fields of Study

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Introduction

Organizational fields are crucial units in helping researchers understand organizational interactions and relationships. They comprise recognized areas of institutional life, but span various organizations involved in creating a final outcome or product (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Field theory suggests that organizations are not inherently stable (Stinchcombe 1965, Fligstein and McAdam 2011), but that they are dynamic, ever changing, and contested. Relationships within fields are highly important as well in understanding organizational actions and field development.

In understanding organizational field relationships, researchers can more thoroughly understand how exogenous shocks and inter-organizational power dynamics impact individual organizations, organizational populations, and the development of organizational fields themselves. The Great Recession offers an opportunity to explore how the affordable housing and food security fields responded to a severe exogenous shock. Their responses were impacted by different organizational structures, historical developments, and funding structures that impact their opportunities for innovation, change, and influence in their field.

Additionally, while scholars have studied how the Great Recession has impacted individuals (Grusky, Western, and Wimer 2011, Sherman 2013) as well as the nonprofit sector as a whole (Reich, Wimer, Mohamed, & Jambulapati 2011, Salamon 2012), less
research has delved into its specific impact on social service organizations in areas as basic as food and housing. Social service organizations have experienced significant increases in need from the community over the past five years, often in conjunction with a countercyclical drop in donations (Reich et al 2011). Research on the nonprofit sector also does not fully take into account new developments in sociology’s theoretical conception of organizational fields that focus on interaction in addition to structure.

This study investigates how these organizations that are so crucial to helping families regain or maintain their stability manage their own stability in increasingly uncertain times. General instability is now the norm for many basic social service organizations. Since a major cause of the Great Recession was an inflated housing market, investigating affordable housing organizations can help us to understand the aftermath of the foreclosure and property devaluation and how these organizations coped with an influx of clients. Food security organizations are first line responders to families falling into poverty. Comparing the food security and housing organizational fields will allow us to understand more about how fields vary within basic social services. From an organizational field perspective, the external shocks these organizations faced can help us to understand reactions to uncertainty in the field as a whole. As one respondent articulated to me, “the non-profit sector is hard right now too. It’s a tough environment with uncertainty, funding issues, increased need with a decrease in resources” (1205).

Understanding the organizational fields within which they operate is critical to understand the structures and constraints of their decisions and choices.
This research suggests that we need to compare organizational populations and fields within the nonprofit sector more carefully to understand changes in funding and organizational structure more fully. In understanding these micro-fields within the larger nonprofit sector and meso-level social service sector, we can understand more thoroughly the provision of social services and charity in the United States. Understanding how social service organizations respond to uncertainty, both programmatic and financial, has policy implications for both public-private partnerships, studies of organizational effectiveness, and how we understand the choices of the nonprofit social services sector (Gronbjerg 1993). By understanding the organizational fields within the nonprofit sector, researchers can understand the provision of social services and the ways in which its complexity is complicated by the heterogeneous fields within the sector.
Literature Review

Fields are dynamic, changing, and contested spheres of organizational life (Fligstein and McAdam 2011). An exogenous shock like the Great Recession creates a space for contestation within the field and an opportunity to study how organizations adapt to uncertainty and change. Particularly in research on the nonprofit sector, organizational fields are understudied.

Many scholars have studied organizational uncertainty and organizational fields (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Meyer and Rowan 1977, Galaskiewicz and Bielefeld 1998, Fligstein and McAdam 2011). Prior neo-institutional and resource dependency research investigates the tactics organizations use to respond to the uncertainty they face, be that conforming to isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), adopting myths for their organizational activities (Meyer and Rowan 1977), or altering the ways in which they structured their organizational focus.

As many scholars have articulated, organizational form does not occur in a vacuum. Organizations take certain forms based on the historical period in which they were established (Stinchcombe 1965) and the external pressures they face from resource dependency to regulations as they continue to evolve (Oliver 1991). Form is affected by the many opportunity structures, resources, and cultural tools currently available as well as the opportunities and resources the organization deems lacking (Rao, Morrill & Zald
As such, form is informed by an organization’s place in its organizational field and its relationships within the field (Martin 2003). As Gronbjerg (1991) articulates, “in the social service field, the organizational environment is characterized by mutual dependence focused around the cooperative production of services” (160). Organizations’ forms are related to their dependence on other organizations in their field, especially in the nonprofit sector.

Researchers need to understand how organizational fields change and what causes them to do so. Exogenous shocks provide an opportunity to study organizational adaptations and change. Few researchers have investigated organizational fields in the context of the Great Recession (Grusky et al. 2011), an exogenous shock, which was both unexpected and economically debilitating for many nonprofit organizations. Moreover, few nonprofit sector researchers have studied the role of organizational fields, which differs from the traditional for-profit private sector because it is not profit driven and has unique stakeholders. Organizational reactions to such unexpected change have significant implications for their continued ability to serve clients effectively and have the potential to change the way in which their field functions, altering not only structural patterns, but also interactional, relational patterns.

Organizational Field Theory:

This research draws on the dynamic instability of fields to investigate how they change in the face of external shocks and how their structure and composition matters for the particular organizations within them. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983) an organizational field refers to “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a
recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (148). The organizational fields, or collectivities of organizations, within which many organizations reside, are not stable, unchanging fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2011). Contrary to Stinchcombe’s original supposition that organizational forms remain stable and inert over large periods of time (Stinchcombe 1965), nonprofit organizations in the human services field have experienced significant alterations of form as a result of external pressures and changes in the composition of their field in the past thirty years. These pressures have continued to impact the forms these organizations take and the evolution of their fields, as well as the sector as a whole.

Organizational fields build on the concept of having a population of organizations operating in the same or very similar domain and offering similar services or products (Scott 2001). Fields are bounded by the presence of shared cultural-cognitive or normative frameworks or a common regulatory system so as to “constitute a recognized area of institutional life” (Scott 2001, 84). They are important concepts for researchers’ investigations of organizational relationships and interactions (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Fields are “structured spaces of positions (or posts) whose properties depend on their position within these spaces and which can be analyzed independently of the characteristics of their occupants (which are partly determined by them)” (from Bourdieu 1993, in Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 6). ¹

¹ Organizational populations, on the other hand, are defined as a collection or aggregation of organizations that are “alike in some respect”; in particular, they are “classes of organizations that are relatively homogeneous in
This research adds to the current developments in organizational field research that suggest that field structure is often related to patterns of relations (Martin 2003). By including culture in our understanding of organizations, researchers may better understand conditions and constraints of organizational innovation (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). The conception of organizational field structures being connected to patterns of relations within the field is particularly important in the nonprofit sector, with its diversity of stakeholders and the power dynamics between them as the organization seeks to accomplish its mission. “Structure exists only to the extent that actors are able to continuously produce and reproduce it” (Scott 2001, 110, from Giddens 1984). These structures and relationships are often based in the historical development of organizations, so “a long historical attention span is crucial to grasping and explaining both our current institutionalized assumptions about the nature and functioning of organizations in general and the nature and functioning of individual organizations in particular” (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 18).

Martin (2003) compares organizational field relations to a game in which, “every field has a coherence based on a working consensus to the nature of the game, and people take predictable sides due to the more general structuring of social space” (23). Every field is a site of struggle, with the stakes being that dominant organizations determine the future direction of the field (Martin 2003, Bourdieu 1985). Dominant organizations are terms of environmental vulnerability” (Hannan and Freeman 1977: 166 in Scott 2001, 84). So, while food security and affordable housing are the organizational fields of interest in this study, the organizational populations of interest are food pantries and local affordable housing organizations.
interested in maintaining their status and influence, while dominated organizations seek to improve their field position whenever possible through innovation. “Organizations not only have interests – and corresponding strategies of action – grounded in the discrete positions they happen to occupy within fields, interests that drive them into competition with one another, but also shared commitments to or investments in those fields as a whole” (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, 18). As a result of this jostling, organizations face a potential for upheaval when the conservation strategy of the dominant organization is overwhelmed by the subversion strategy of the dominated organizations (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Exogenous shocks create opportunities for such contestation.

*Fields and Resource Dependency:*

One of the biggest challenges for nonprofit organizations is managing resources, particularly diverse funding sources, many of which may be short term (Gronbjerg 1993). New developments to combine neo-institutional theories with resource dependency (Oliver 1991) are particularly useful in understanding the structures and constraints within which nonprofit organizations operate. Theories that also attempt to combine the social movement literature with neo-institutional concepts may also be quite useful for understanding the nonprofit sector more thoroughly (Lounsbury, Ventresca, and Hirsch 2003), helping researchers to investigate how organizations are shaped by social structures of both meanings (culture) and resources.

From a neo-institutional perspective, nonprofit organizations are part of the value socialization that perpetuates our social norms (Martin 2003). Indeed, “efforts to secure and manage resources are shaped by opportunities and limitations that derive in part from
the nonprofit status of the organization” (Gronbjerg 1991, 160). Resources in nonprofit organizations are connected not only to cultural meanings of these services and relationships with funders, but also to the direct services provided. Particularly as funders shift their expectations, from federal funding cuts, a shift from grants to service contracts, and stiff competition for donor support, organizational survival has become more complex (Alexander 2000). Nonprofit organizations must balance the many unique, competing demands of their fields, maintaining relationships with other, more dominant organizations in the field while carving out their own niche to procure funds and in-kind support.

In a crowded organizational field, such as food security, the environment is more structured because the organizations are clustered around the same services and mission (Martin 2003). This is further compounded by the limited resources over which all of these organizations compete since they have the same mission. Particularly with the rise of government grants and contracts to nonprofits, inter-organizational networks form around these relationships between the government and private sector. These inter-organizational networks are crucial nodes in organizational fields. Funding may be channeled through multiple organizations before reaching the actual organization that provides the direct services (Gronbjerg 1991). Government contracts require significant resources and investments in personnel to secure and maintain, which means they can easily begin to dominate an organization’s activities (Gronbjerg 1991). This creates the potential for a continuing cycle in which organizations become more and more dependent on their government contracts, even while also receiving funding from other sources.
These contracts create an institutional environment with the government serving as a powerful and central actor, with implications for organizations’ actions (Bielefeld and Corbin 1996). Nonprofit organizations may attempt to mitigate the uncertainty in their funding and dependency on government contracts with earned income revenue and other funding sources. Earned income and fees means that nonprofit organizations must find a balance between fee generating activities and specific social services. “For most social service organizations, efforts to manage fees occur in an environment of uncertainty and lack of control over the supply and characteristics of clients and the number and capacities of competitors. However client paid fees allow organizations to control the content, structure, and timing of management tasks.” (Gronbjerg 1991, 164). Thus, even earned income is not a perfect solution to funding uncertainty within the nonprofit sector.

Donors play a crucial role in nonprofit organizations generally, but particularly in contributing to the complexity of the organizational field and its resource dependency. Donors and funders that provide critical resources may influence how the mission is implemented and which organizations are most influential (Gronbjerg 1991). As Gronbjerg (1991) articulates, “donations separate customers (donors) from clients (service recipients), and agencies have no effective leverage over donors or ability to generate the funding through their own service efforts” (Gronbjerg 1991, 165).

Organizational fields, relationships, and reactions to upheaval have significant implications for food security and affordable housing organizations’ continued ability to serve their clients effectively and have the potential to change the way in which their field functions to serve those in need. To more fully understand the impacts of the Great
Recession and organizational fields on organizational action, we must investigate how the food security and affordable housing organizational fields coped with a sharp increase in the need for their services. By understanding the field structure, history, and funding, researchers can understand the impact of organizational relationships and interactions in shaping the organizational field.

Nonprofit Sector Theory:

Understanding the micro-fields within the nonprofit sector is useful for researchers interested in how organizations adapt and influence other organizations to impact the delivery of services. Nonprofit organizations are the physical manifestations of U.S. society’s institutionalization of charity (Hall 1987). Gronbjerg (2001) finds that human service organizations are the largest proportion of charitable nonprofits in the United States. Human services, or social services, encompasses a wide variety of services, so must be further broken down to achieve meso-level organizational understandings of the dynamics at work in nonprofit organizational fields. As the third sector between government and for-profit organizations, nonprofit organizations play an important role in how U.S. society views the provision of public goods. As the United States government has given more and more responsibility to the private nonprofit sector for the provision of public goods, more and more “the public funding network in which nonprofit social service agencies participate separates responsibility for implementing policy decisions from the delivery of services” (Gronbjerg 1991, 169). Such new responsibilities, particularly in combination with an external shock, may lead to an increase in organizational stress and an increase in external nonprofit collaborations in an
attempt to manage increased workloads and responsibilities (Baum and Singh 1996). As discussed previously, this resource dependency shapes the field (Oliver 1991). Moreover, “nonprofit funding sources differ in how predictable and controllable they are and therefore in the amount of uncertainty they introduce into organizational decision making” (Gronbjerg 1991, 160). This unpredictability has important consequences for the social service organizational fields and the prioritization of certain missions over others.

Since nonprofit organizations must balance characteristics of public and private sector organizations, their adaptation strategies may be complex as they seek out strategies that balance their private and public aspects (Alexander 2000). In a study of organizations serving youth, Alexander (2000) finds similar adaptation strategies to those of my study, including “strategic expansion of services and client bases, networking as a means to acquire and stabilize revenue streams and resources, and increased use of business techniques and technology to generate outcome measures and an image of effectiveness with funders (Alexander 2000, 287). Adaptation techniques have direct implications for organizational funding, and thus influence in their field. “Strategies for obtaining and securing funding favor those with well-defined identities, strong reputations, good marketing efforts, and highly developed and easily activated networks” (Gronbjerg 1991, 170). Thus, organizations with proven track records and connections are better placed to continue to receive funding from diverse funders, improving their position within their field.

The nonprofit sector, especially organizations related to housing and food insecurity, have become established and institutionalized in the past three decades. The
recession further cemented their institutionalization as private providers of public goods. Interaction and relationships are critical to the success of individual organizations, as well as the organizational fields in which they reside.
Data and Methods

I conducted this research from April 2013 to December 2013 in central Ohio using a qualitative, interview based comparative case study of food security and affordable housing organizations. As an inductive, grounded approach, this means I continued to hone my theoretical focus throughout the data collection process (Charmaz 2006). A grounded approach was necessary to learn about the strategies these organizations used to combat uncertainty that might not appear in annual reports or other materials. My theoretical sensitivity is based on the literatures on nonprofits, organizations, organizational fields, and the Great Recession. It is also based on my professional experiences in the nonprofit sector and my interactions as a professional with food pantries and housing organizations (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The analytic process informs my conclusions from the data. This grounded approach is useful in that it “allows a place for ‘experience’ in the formulation of working hypotheses” (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont 2006, 149), permitting me to redefine my ideas as my interviews unfolded.

Food security organizations include food banks and food pantries. The affordable housing organizations in this study include foreclosure assistance and low-income, affordable housing development organizations. I studied seven food pantries, one food bank, one food bank association, and four affordable housing organizations. I chose these
organizations because they are two critical fields in the social service sector, providing services for two basic human needs. By investigating how even basic needs services differ based on their organizational fields, I demonstrate the importance of fields in the nonprofit sector and their usefulness in understanding organizational relationships and organizational change. As fields, they are constructed differently, with one being highly centralized locally and one being more diffuse. This study cannot speak to the entire nonprofit sector’s experience of the Great Recession, but it may be generalizable to the thousands of food pantries as well as the many affordable housing organizations.

I chose my cases theoretically and with careful consideration. My data include food pantries in varied geographical locations within the metro area, three suburban and four urban. Interviewing suburban pantries is particularly informative since U.S. cities experienced a suburbanization of poverty in terms of food insecurity and foreclosure rates in the suburbs (Coleman-Jensen 2012, Eckholm 2007). I did not include food pantries in rural locations because they are beyond the central Ohio metropolitan area and face a different set of issues related to poverty than urban/suburban pantries. I selected the specific cases within the urban/suburban ranges based on their staff size, budget, my personal knowledge of the field of food pantries and affordable housing organizations based on previous work experience, as well as their availability to sit down with me for interviews. It is important to note that the organizations I interviewed would be considered by their peer organizations to be high quality, meaning they serve a majority of the families facing food and housing issues in the area and have paid staff. Staff at these organizations varied from three part time staff to over 100 paid staff. They also
have had success in securing diverse funding. I selected cases that varied in the size of their budgets, from tens of thousands of dollars to millions of dollars. Many food pantries, especially small ones, rely entirely on volunteers. I did not interview any of these pantries. Fewer affordable housing organizations exist in the area, so I selected three with nonprofit status and one planning commission that is also involved in housing activities. These four organizations also vary in size, funding, and staff numbers, so they provide a useful overview of the affordable housing field.

Lastly, I selected the geographic area primarily for access reasons. I also selected it because, as a Midwestern city, it experienced the Great Recession in ways considered average across the nation. With its anchor institutions, including a large university and major hospital systems, it weathered the recession better than other areas of the state, such as the rust belt and Appalachian southeast, which have compounding challenges with more generalized economic changes related to industrial and mineral production. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Ohio’s unemployment rate peaked at 10.6% from July 2009 – February 2010 before beginning a decline that continues to hover around 7%. As of December 2013, the Columbus, Ohio metropolitan area had a 5.5% unemployment rate compared to a 7.2% overall unemployment rate in Ohio. Central Ohio is not an extreme example of how nonprofit organizations reacted to the economic downturn and it helps to isolate the Great Recession as a theoretical variable because central Ohio does not face the same unique economic issues as other parts of the state.

My data comprise twenty-six recorded, in depth, semi-structured interviews with thirty two staff members at food security and affordable housing organizations. To access
organizations’ staff members for interviews, I first contacted the communications or marketing manager for the organization. Based on their response to my request, I then scheduled an interview with them. After the interview, I used a pseudo-snowball method by asking them to refer me to other middle or upper managers in their organization. With smaller organizations, I contacted the Executive Director or Pantry Manager directly to request an interview. The number of interviews I did with each organization depended on its size, though it averaged approximately three interviews per organization. Many organizations are quite small, so my understanding of them is based on only one interview with the Executive Director or Pantry Manager because that is the only staff the organization maintains or the only person knowledgeable enough about the organization.

Access was an issue in some organizations. As such, an organization I wanted to include in the study is not included, indicating selection issues and potential non-response error bias. Those organizations who were unresponsive to me may introduce systematic measurement error into my cases because all non-respondents share some characteristic, such as lack of marketing staff or no paid staff. As mentioned previously, all of these organizations serve a large number of families experiencing housing and food challenges in the Central Ohio area. Nonetheless, through varying the characteristics of the organizations with which I spoke, I achieved a good overview of the two organizational populations.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours, with the average length being an hour and fifteen minutes. I interviewed most of the participants alone, but a few chose to participate in joint interviews with one or two of their co-workers. I conducted eighteen
of the interviews. The other eight interviews are part of a larger project about the Great Recession and unemployment of which I am a part and were conducted by another member of that research team. All but two of the interviews took place at participants’ work places, in private offices or conference rooms. Two interviews occurred in coffee shops.

By using in-depth semi-structured interviews, I left enough open opportunity for participants to discuss what they considered to be pertinent themes and issues relating to their work and organization. In-depth semi-structured interviews are crucial to understand how organizations experienced the economic downturn because they allow staff members at the organizations to share information about how funding, donors, and client need were impacted. They also allowed me to ask follow up questions and to more fully understand organizational choices in the face of uncertainty. While I need to consider in my interpretations that my respondents were reporting their past experiences of the recession through the distorted lens of time and their memories, by talking to multiple staff members, when possible, I am able to consider the cohesiveness or differentiation in their responses to the same questions about the organization. As Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2006) suggest, memory is a cultural phenomenon that “is a function of the cultural categories that shape what is thinkable and what is not, what is counted as appropriate, what is valued, what is noteworthy and so on” (107). In asking staff members to share their memories and understanding of their organization’s behavior, I can more thoroughly understand what they value and what the organization values. Interviews are a highly useful way to understand an organization, its staff members, how
they do their work, and how they have an impact that goes beyond the information they share with media, with donors, and in annual reports. Interview questions focused on a few thematic areas: the staff members’ position and responsibilities at the organization, duration of time they have held their position, organizational programs, funding, networks to which they belong individually and as an organization, how they have seen their organization adapting to the recession, and their vision for their organization’s future.
An Introduction to Food Security and Affordable Housing Non-Profit Organizations

Food Security:

The food security field is comprised of a variety of stakeholders and organizational actors who all work to ensure that our society is able to feed families experiencing poverty. While government programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, Children (WIC) play an important role in the food security field and in alleviating hunger, for this paper I focus on nonprofit, non-government organizations that provide emergency food services. Figure 1 provides a description of the key actors in the nonprofit food security field.

At the top of the nonprofit food security supply chain described in Figure 1 is the Feeding America Network, a nationwide network of food banks. Feeding America partners with food banks across the country to procure food, provide training, and advocate for favorable food security policies. Member food banks pay member fees (Feeding America). Below Feeding America, statewide associations of food banks may exist. These statewide associations provide state level administration for food procurement programs, grant opportunities for food banks and their pantry affiliates, and state level advocacy. The state level association receives its funding mostly from federal and state government sources, though some funds come from private grants and
donations (1316). The majority of these funds are then used to purchase food on behalf of all the food banks, improving food banks’ purchasing power (1316). Food banks, then, are connected to both the statewide association as well as the national Feeding America organization. The statewide association is also a Feeding America affiliate.

At the food bank level, the food supply chain becomes more diverse. A food bank is a collector and distributor of large scale food donations, which it then disperses to food pantries to give out to their clients. Food banks in particular saw a 31.9% increase in donations from 2007-2009, in the heart of the recession (Preston 2011, Reich et al. 2011). This increase is very large compared to other nonprofit organizations’ precipitous declines in funding. Some food pantries experienced an increase in funding, but most did not. While Reich et al. (2011) comment on the phenomenon of increasing food bank donations, they do not attempt to explain it, which is where this research on the food security field steps in. Food banks vary in size and the amount of food they distribute. They are influential middlemen in the food security field’s resource procurement efforts, giving them critical dominance and influence over food pantries.

Member agencies, including food pantries, comprise the final level of food security organizations and see to it that food is distributed to families experiencing hunger and hardship. Since 2006, they have experienced a 40% increase in clients served. Being a member agency of the local food bank benefits pantries because the substantial discounts of the bargaining and distribution power of the food bank and statewide association accrue to them. Food banks share the cost of the food they store and distribute with their member agencies through a shared maintenance fee. In central Ohio, this fee is
eight cents per pound. With this fee, member agencies pay eight cents per pound on food they order that has been donated to the food bank. If they request food that the food bank has had to purchase, food pantries pay the discounted price of that food (so $1 per jar of peanut butter) without the shared maintenance fee (1321).

Food pantries vary in size and scope. The food pantries in this study include the 20% of pantries that are serving 80% of the food the food bank distributes in Franklin County (1071). They are very high volume pantries. My data do not capture low distribution pantries or those outside the food bank network. Most food pantries, though, are small, often faith-based, and serve a very specific population (1071). Three of the pantries in this study are faith-based. Usually food pantries provide 3-7 days of food for families. They often have geographic and income stipulations related to whom they serve and they usually will only serve clients once or twice per month. Such stipulations constrain their geographic spheres of activity, with implications for their location and level of influence within their organizational field.

On the left side of Figure 1 are the funders of the food security field and the varying levels of the hierarchy to which they channel funds and in-kind donations. The federal government provides funds for food security to the Feeding America Network, to statewide food bank associations, and to state and local governments. State and local governments also distribute federal funds to statewide associations of food banks or to state food banks. Private donations and grants also flow to all levels of the food security field in varying amounts and as in-kind and cash donations. As Figure 1 shows, it is rare for food pantries to receive direct support from any level of government. Instead, they
rely on their inter-organizational networks with food banks to indirectly receive
government funds. The food security field’s funding structure, historical development,
organizational structure, and lack of fee for service opportunities dictates in many ways
the actions and adaptations of food banks and food pantries in ways that differ from the
affordable housing field.

Affordable Housing:

The affordable housing organizational field is less centralized within a single
national or local hierarchy than the food security organizational field. While many of the
local organizations still maintain national level affiliations and rely on these affiliations
for resources and networking opportunities, they do not rely on their national affiliations
for enhanced bargaining power to fulfill their mission’s work at a local level. These
national organizations, such as National Council of La Raza and NeighborWorks, are
important channelers of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and other federal
government funds to the local level. NeighborWorks is even a congressionally chartered
corporation, meaning it receives a direct annual appropriation from Congress for its work,
which it then grants out to its member agencies (NW website, 1322). Housing, as a
critical component to the ideology of the American Dream, has historically been much
more visibly supported by government than food security. Affordable housing efforts,
too, though, serve purposes beyond the alleviation of poverty and provision of safe
housing for low-income citizens. Affordable housing impacts the middle class too, which
has implications for its field. Housing is intricately connected to the larger economy,
serving as a tool for economic stimulus (Edson, Iglesias, and Lento 2011, Krippner
In the aftermath of the Great Recession, all levels of government, as shown in Figure 2, provided resources to the affordable housing field to stimulate the economy through new construction and rehabilitation, as well as to keep families in their homes through restructured mortgages. This large funding injection is a key difference from the food security field.

Affordable housing organizations help families secure affordable housing in a variety of ways, from rental and purchase opportunities to foreclosure prevention assistance, homebuyer education classes, and down payment assistance. Affordable housing organizations interface directly with local governments to access funds, gain tax subsidies, and purchase land or property. Affordable housing organizations, including those in this study, all take a slightly different approach to their mission as a result of the decentralization of the local field. Some provide 0% interest mortgages that the organization itself maintains, while others use local banks to secure mortgages for clients. Most participate in building and rehabilitating homes in neighborhoods throughout the city. Each organization tends to target specific neighborhoods for their work, sometimes even partnering with one another in a particular area. Such targeted efforts are often related to local government tax subsidies and the concentration of low income populations and deteriorating housing stock in these areas. Not all affordable housing organizations are nonprofit organizations, but this study only includes those with 501(c)3 status. Being part of a mixed field that includes both for profit and nonprofit options to attain services has impacted how the field has developed.
Affordable housing organizations rely heavily on government funding, particularly at the state and city level. In the past, they have relied as well on homebuyer funding through HUD, but that funding has diminished with the rise in foreclosures (1215). More recently, they have been receiving HUD money for foreclosure prevention services, but worry about the future of their funding as foreclosures lessen and the focus of the housing sector shifts again to home buying. Government housing priorities directly affect the priorities of these local organizations. With the most recent recession, though, they also received millions of dollars from the Neighborhood Stabilization Program of the federal stimulus. The federal government funneled these funds to affordable housing organizations through state and local channels. This huge influx in funding increased their home building activities significantly and made it possible for them to weather the recession well and grow in terms of funding and staff. All of them are also channels for federal Restoring Stability and Save the Dream Ohio programs to help families on the verge of foreclosure or behind in their mortgage payments stay in their homes. The affordable housing organizations are middlemen for these federal funds, serving as the link between the government and individuals.

Figure 2 shows the funding and affiliation structure of the affordable housing organizational field. On the left are the affordable housing organizations themselves, at both the federal and local levels. This differs from the food security field in that there are fewer state and local level middlemen organizations in the field. The state housing financing authority plays somewhat of a middleman role in some situations, such as the Save the Dream Ohio program. Funding from the national affiliates goes directly to local
housing assistance organizations. The affordable housing field must also balance donations and grants from federal, state, and local governments as well as private donations. These grants and donations may be channeled through the national organizations, but they are often given directly to the local affordable housing organizations. This is a significant difference from food security, in which pantries rarely access government funds. Additionally, local affordable housing organizations often maintain earned income revenue streams that further directly supplement their operating revenue. This earned income revenue is a key distinguisher of the affordable housing field from the food security field.

Case Differences:

While the food security and affordable housing fields both provide critical social services to their clients and struggle to balance funding issues, they also differ in ways that have important implications for their organizational field. Some of these differences, discussed below, include funding structures, historical field development, organizational structures, client relationships, and the use of earned income revenue streams. Food pantries, in particular, are much more constrained in their activities and funding than local affordable housing organizations because of their field’s structure and historical development. Affordable housing organizations are more able to enter into market-based activities like earned income activities, which may improve their financial stability.
Discussion

Food pantries and housing organizations, in particular, differ from one another in their reactions to the uncertainty brought on by the recession. These differences are based on the composition of their respective organizational fields, from funding structures and their historical field development to client relationships and capacity for earned income activities. According to all of my respondents, the need for affordable housing and food security services has increased tremendously in the past five years, which can place great strain on an organization. This strain may then be compounded by organizational field constraints that impact the organizations’ ability to fulfill their mission.

Importantly, food and housing are intertwined in the determination of the federal poverty guidelines. The federal poverty guidelines, originally established in the 1960s, suggested that households should be spending about one third of their income on food and one third on housing. As food production has become more highly processed, large scale, and efficient, the cost of food has decreased. While much discussion now centers on nutritional value, food is still relatively inexpensive. In tandem, the cost of housing has increased significantly. Housing, particularly if owned, is a fairly illiquid asset. Many families, especially in the run up to the most recent recession, highly leveraged themselves through the housing market, spending much more than one third of their income on housing. Often, when faced with difficult financial decisions such as those
related to housing challenges, food is one of the first cuts in a family’s budget because it is more easily cut than illiquid housing assets.

Dim[...](field Development):

Food security and affordable housing have developed differently, with implications for their current funding stability. Emergency food services have existed for hundreds of years in the form of soup kitchens and bread lines. Since the 1980s, though, food pantries and food banks have become increasingly widespread and sophisticated manifestations of emergency food services in the United States, connected through food bank networks, and institutionalized into the larger charity landscape (Poppendieck 1998). While food pantries and food banks began as emergency services, meant to be temporary responses to assist laid-off factory workers, the steady stream of clients has continued unabated for the past thirty years (Poppendieck 1998). Foodbanks and food pantries emerged as a response to the Reagan administration’s dismantling of social safety net programs and continued to grow in scope as the welfare reform enacted by Clinton took shape (Poppendieck 1998). Food pantries and food banks have now become completely institutionalized responders to hunger in the United States, but this is a fairly recent phenomenon. Furthermore, their rise has only come about as a result of deep and deeper cuts to government entitlement programs established after the Great Depression that historically provided for impoverished citizens.

Federal government programs related to affordable housing have been in place since the early 20th century, far before food security entered the government agenda. Affordable housing first entered the federal agenda in shipbuilding legislation of 1917,
followed by the National Housing Act of 1934, and the U.S. Housing Act of 1937. In 1949, following World War II, Congress enacted the Housing Act of 1949, with the goal of a “decent home and suitable living environment for all Americans” (Edson et al. 2011), a cornerstone of the American Dream. In 1965, Housing and Urban Development, the agency responsible for housing initiatives today, became a cabinet level agency, taking the place of its predecessor, the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HUD History Website). These acts paved the way for the affordable housing sector and for the development of the U.S. housing sector in general.

Affordable housing did not have it beginnings as a temporary government program, a key difference from the food security field, which has often been referred to as emergency food, a temporary issue. While its funding may be cyclical, waning and growing at times, affordable housing has been a permanent part of the federal government funding equation since the early 20th century. This is different from the emergency food case, which has only risen in stature since the 1980s. Moreover, since the national NeighborWorks organization is a congressionally chartered corporation, these organizations and their agenda to provide safe, quality, affordable housing to families is firmly entrenched in federal priorities, which has important funding implications for local level affordable housing organizations.

Organizational structures and field implications at the local level:

Differing hierarchies and field structures create different opportunities and constraints for organizations. At the local level, the food security field is a much more highly centralized hierarchy than the affordable housing field because of the concentration of
food procurement resources at the food banks. One affordable housing staff member shared his organization’s unique position, saying that, “we have an interesting perspective because we are very local, but we’re also part of national networks and are keyed into national trends” (1322). Food pantries cannot claim the same connection to national trends in the food security field. Both types of social service organizations are somewhat centralized, though, around established government funding and inter-organizational relationships within their respective fields. The affordable housing field, though, has fewer influential, dominating middlemen organizations than the food security field.

As shown in Figure 1, food pantries are especially reliant on their local food bank to channel resources to them. While food pantries do seek private external resources, the scope of their impact is usually limited to a certain geographic area which also limits the range of external funders with whom they can build relationships. As they seek to differentiate themselves in the crowded food security field, food pantries find themselves balancing the need to conform to the requirements and recommendations of the food bank while simultaneously seeking their own niche in the services they offer. As such, food pantries may not only offer emergency food services, but may also offer employment services, health services, governmental social service benefit application assistance, tax assistance, or other services related to general poverty alleviation. One pantry director says, “Food is the bait to get people in here to see what they really need” (1082). As the food security organizations articulate repeatedly, hunger is a symptom of poverty, so these services are useful to the clients of the food pantry, as well as the
organizations themselves in carving out niche areas to differentiate themselves from other pantries and social service agencies. Sometimes, though, the services offered by pantries are offered because of resources they have been offered from further up the food chain to serve as the point of entry for a particular program, such as benefit application and tax assistance programs, which are coordinated through the statewide association of food banks. While food pantries see these services as helping their clients, they also help them to increase their resources.

The food bank is the major provider of emergency food in Central Ohio, which gives it huge influence in the behavior of food pantries. This allows it to set prices and policies, prices that pantries must pay because the food bank is the best deal in town. These low prices though, are still higher than the price of donations directly to the pantry, which are free. So while the food bank’s compilation of large scale donations is a critical service for pantries, it also costs them thousands, tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of dollars each year, usually a vast majority of their budget. Still, procuring food with donated cash from the food bank is more efficient from a dollar for dollar perspective than buying canned goods purchased at market prices. One pantry manager shares that “it’s by far the best price in town. I can’t complain about what they charge us, but it does add up” (1326). Without a doubt, the food bank is the dominant organization in the local food security field. However, as one respondent shared, “we’d never be able to do it if we weren’t all working together.” Food banks and their food pantry member agencies maintain mutually beneficial relationships, even if those relationships are sometimes tense. Without food pantries, the food banks would not exist.
With their large sphere of influence, the food bank can also encourage initiatives they support, such as fresh produce distribution, introduction of online ordering technology, and community gardens. Right now, “there is a big push toward nutrition. For years, we’ve (the food banks and statewide association) been pushing the most nutritious produce we can find. We’re at the head of that.” But, as a pantry staff member articulated to me, “there is that disconnect between philosophically this is what we need to do [provide healthy food] and practically, here is what is available” (1320).

From a technology perspective, the food bank has moved to doing ordering “on a more electronic basis, not as much paperwork if possible, which is kind of hard because a lot of the people we deal with are elderly, so they’re not as computer savvy as maybe some of the younger people are. Fortunately we’ve been able to kind of convert them over. If they don’t know, they usually have someone in the family or someone that’s around them that has a computer or internet where they can access our systems and be able to receive the product that we send out to them. At first we got pushback from the pantries because the population of volunteers was elderly because they weren’t familiar with computers and didn’t have access to them” (1324). Even with pushback, the food bank continued forward with the change to an online ordering system, a system which is now completely in place.

The food bank can also dominate media and fundraising efforts in the local metropolitan area. Around the holiday season, they even purchased their first advertising slot on a local news channel (1321). Usually, though, their media is earned media based around educational pieces that do not cost money. The local food bank now has its own
food pantry, so it is now more intentionally investigating best practices for food pantries. At the same time, though, this pantry is another example of expanding influence into new spheres previously inhabited by only member agencies. The food bank’s food pantry is “a huge opportunity for the marketing department, so any time there’s interviews or media or fundraising pushes, anything, they always have folks down here in the pantry” (1325). As such, the food bank is furthering its dominance in the food security organizational field. The affordable housing field’s most dominant organization does not have such complete control over the distribution of resources as the food bank.

As part of the secondary food supply chain, the food bank is somewhat insulated because it passes on rising food and maintenance/storage costs to its consumers, food pantries and other member agencies. Over the past five years, the food bank has grown tremendously, doubling its staff size to over 100 employees. Food pantries are at the bottom of the food supply chain and the food security organizational field. They are just getting food, and often require complete reliance on cash and in-kind donations to do their work. Many grants consider food purchases to be operating costs, meaning they cannot apply for grants to directly do their work. This further constrains their ability to upset the power relationships in their field and maintains the food bank’s dominance as a local resource provider.

*Funding Differences:*

While both food security and housing organizations in this study experienced unprecedented growth in need and in funding, their separate spheres for funding are constructed differently on a local level within their respective fields, leading to
differential access and relationships between organizations. While food banks centralize food access for food pantries in the local context, affordable housing organizations all seek funding directly from local government sources. Food banks and housing do share that their funding comes from government and private funders, either directly or through national affiliations. All of these organizations, as nonprofits, face unstable funding situations and must, as one respondent articulated, know that “a transition in funding is something that you have to address, that stability factor, because you never know what you are going to get year to year” (1319).

Food pantries, though, usually only receive government funds indirectly. As one respondent shared, “Costs have skyrocketed 40% between need growing and the food bank’s prices rising, but folks have responded knowing that we’re in crisis, so there’s been a zillion food drives for us” (1071/1082). Food pantries rely on local, individual donors. At the local level, though, food banks are a large centralizer of resources compared to the affordable housing organizations, which tend to partner with each other more and the city more directly in seeking funds. For example, one housing organization respondent said, “Look at our relationship with the city; it’s great, they love us” (1267) in articulating the importance of building relationships and their direct relationships with their funders.

In looking to their uncertain futures, both types of organizations are turning to technology and further professionalization of their organizations and staff to improve their chances of securing more funding and to more effectively demonstrate their impacts in local communities. A housing organization staff member shared that, “all of the
funders are impacted by it [the recession] so there’s a lot more competition amongst organizations for funds” (1215). Another says that, “What I am seeing from donors, from champions, is that they’re being more selective and what they want to see is results. Now if you’re delivering results, they’re still going to give, but if you’re on the bubble, those are the nonprofits that are hurting” (1320). Part of this change in technology and professionalization is based on the stringent requirements of funders, which have continued to increase in the Recession, as many have fewer dollars to give. As one respondent shared, “we definitely saw shifts in terms of funding; we traditionally worked with several different funders who provided funding on a consistent basis in fairly large amounts; with the economic turn it made them think about how they want to spend the funds they have, so we’re still able to get the funds we need, but we have to be a lot more diversified and creative in applying to a lot more different foundations than we normally would be” (1071/1082). Indeed, as Sewell articulates, “schemas not empowered or regenerated by resources would eventually be abandoned and forgotten, just as resources without cultural schemas to direct their use would eventually dissipate and decay” (in Scott 2001, 50). This means that funding and cultural relevance are deeply connected. As such, funders’ requirements are highly influential in driving change in the nonprofit sector, including the food security and affordable housing fields. One respondent shared that, “It used to be good enough to say that we’re doing good work so we should be given money to do the good work, and then they started wanting to know deliverables, and that turned into outputs, and now its outcomes.
This was the late 1990s. I think everyone is getting more sophisticated. The status quo is really expensive and if the status quo doesn’t work, then people are going to want to see evidenced based programming and behavior in the nonprofit world” (1322).

As another respondent shared, “We’ve moved more into a business model so to speak and keep that grassroots feel to it” (1315). If funders expect these organizations to be highly professional, business-like, and technology driven, those organizations in the field most able to do so will adopt these mechanisms to improve their funding opportunities. Smaller organizations in the field will seek to emulate the dominant organizations in their field to improve their own chances at procuring funding. And, as a staff member at the statewide association of food banks tells me, “the challenge is to keep adapting and try not only to adapt but to set the pace and the direction” (1316). So, not only are they trying to adapt as dominant organizations, but those in dominant positions are seeking to influence the entire field, especially funders’ priorities.

Funding for food security and affordable housing also differs as a result of the exogenous shock of the Great Recession and the collapse of the housing market. The federal government did increase SNAP allotments and relaxed eligibility requirements for a few years, but its work requirements have been re-implemented and SNAP allotments were cut in November 2013. While the expansions of these programs helped many food stamp clients, it did not impact the funding for food pantries and food banks, so they continued to struggle to meet increased need. Affordable housing, on the other hand, experienced a huge influx of stimulus funds to stabilize the housing market. As one
respondent shared, “We were fortunate, we are in the housing area and all the neighborhood stabilization funding came about as a result of the housing bust” (1267). Another added, “it’s so interesting bc we are actually stronger than we’ve ever been; the housing economic recovery act was really beneficial to us; we were able to serve many more families than we would have served without that money” (1314). A third suggested that, “Any other recession would have looked different for us, but this was so heavily foreclosure laden, it was about housing. So the result was that we grew, and we grew dramatically. I don’t think we’re growing any more” (1322). While these housing organizations weathered the recession well, they also realize that, “there were a lot of NSP funds that have run out, so the explosion of building that we had over the past couple of years, that money is gone and it’s not coming back” (1313). One respondent even said that, “I feel like what will be really interesting is what happens to organizations like ours and others, particularly food, like the food bank, they got so much attention, and rightfully so, during this crisis, and you have all this growth and infrastructure, what happens in 5 years following the crisis?” (1322). As such, these organizations must consider their next steps to keep their issue, affordable housing, in the spotlight and funded.

Client Relationships and Fees:

A critical difference between the food security and affordable housing organization fields is the delivery method of these services and the fiscal responsibilities of the client. The organizational structure of the field dictates how organizations handle their relationships with clients and their delivery of services.
Food pantries exchange only donated goods (food) with their clients. Food pantries have worked extensively to instill dignity and respect into the experience of visiting a food pantry, but the essence of the exchange is still completely charity, receiving something for nothing. Such a relationship defines the scope of activity in the field. As one respondent shared, “Middle class people are absolutely ashamed to come in (to the food pantry)” (1044). Another says, “Honestly, I mean, who wants to come to a pantry?” (1320). No amount of volunteer training or simulation of grocery stores can undermine that relationship. Choice food pantries, in which clients choose what they would like from shelves, similar to a grocery store, give clients autonomy, but do not alter the fact that they may have limited choices and that they are not being asked to provide any payment in return. Another respondent articulated that, “people transitioning from middle class to low income need to be needed; they don’t want to feel that they are being given stuff that they don’t deserve; I make stuff up for people to do to help out” (1071/1082). Another pantry manager works to explain to her volunteers that, “being hungry does not mean taking anything that’s given to you” (1323). While it may be good to be charitable, to receive charity can be highly disempowering and degrading, even when done in as dignified a manner as possible (Poppendieck 1998).

The affordable housing organizational field, on the other hand, often offers programs and opportunities in which clients pay a sliding scale fee for some their services or have certain financially based responsibilities to the organization, such as a mortgage payment or rent. In housing, the organization is helping the client to access grant funds or cash-like transfers, be that for foreclosure prevention or down payment assistance, for use in
improving their housing situation. A housing organization staff member suggested that, “sometimes people are more committed to something if they pay for it opposed to it being free” (1215). One organization allows families seeking housing to “always have the option to pass if they don’t like a lot and they can wait for the next one,” (1317) giving families some autonomy in choosing their neighborhood. Such a monetarily based transaction mitigates the negative impact of the service on clients’ dignity. For families purchasing a home from these organizations, the service relationship is also financial. One organization works diligently to find “the sweet spot where the organization is getting from families what they can afford to pay, but not taking so much that we are putting them at risk down the road, especially in this economy” (1314). As one of the housing counselors shared, “the bottom line is, it’s your money, you have the right to spend it as you see fit. We’ll make recommendations, but your actions could be the difference between staying in your house or not” (1073). Another approach is to create a traditional home buying experience:

“Let’s not make this feel like they are buying a house from the federal government, because they’re not, you know, and let’s give them choices …. And let’s give them an experience, that, just because we’re a nonprofit, they don’t need to experience it as a nonprofit. Just because this is an affordable home doesn’t mean that they need to have a different experience than if they went to MI or wherever else” (1322).

Families are paying for their homes, just at a subsidized rate. By incorporating financial transactions more effectively into their model of social service provisions, the affordable
housing organizational field mitigates stigmas about using their services and improves their organization’s financial stability.

**Funding Diversification / Earned Income Revenue Streams:**

These two organizational fields differ in their ability to capture returns from a re-emergent trend in the nonprofit sector, earned income revenue streams. Social enterprises, or nonprofits that engage in for-profit activities (also called earned income revenue streams), acknowledge that in blending the practices and tactics of the for-profit and nonprofit sectors, they can potentially have a broader and deeper impact in the field (Dees and Anderson 2006). If done successfully, a nonprofit organization may use its expertise to generate revenue to support its mission-based activities. As one respondent shared with me, “going forward, the summary is, and anyone will tell you this, traditional sources of funding are going down, the fed the local; so you have two choices, you serve less people, or you do something about it, like social entrepreneurship” (1044). The form a social enterprise takes occurs as a result of the available opportunity structure in the field. One respondent described it, saying, “entrepreneurship is a great idea. Maintaining the identity of the nonprofit is always really important so that what helps the nonprofit survive does not replace the heart of the nonprofit or its mission” (1319). In this way, she captured the challenges of balancing nonprofit and for profit missions. The affordable housing organizations in my study effectively use earned income revenue streams to facilitate their operations and financial stability. Food pantries are unable to leverage their resources to develop earned income revenue streams because they lack a product to sell or the facilities and/or staff to create a value-added service or product.
Affordable housing organizations’ earned income revenue streams set them apart from the food security field in their ability to achieve more funding stability. The affordable housing field’s structure makes earned income possible for these organizations. The affordable housing organizations in this study have all successfully incorporated complementary revenue generating activities into their business models, through holding mortgages, operating a thrift store, overseeing rental communities, selling houses, or some combination of these four. The organizations are also considering implementing a sliding fee scale for their education classes as an additional revenue generator. Such revenue in the case of these housing organizations not only enhances stability, but also provides steady funding for operating costs. As one respondent articulated, “between mortgages and the net of the thrift store, we are able to internally fund ourselves to the tune of $1.5 to $2 million dollars. That is powerful to donors. The money that comes in from the thrift store covers most of our administrative and fundraising expenses” (1267). Another housing organization that is investigating the possibility of starting a sub-entity subcontracting business, says that such initiatives are important because, “this allows us to do anything to these properties without the federal regulations, which are much more extensive in terms of work that you have to do” (1215). Federal funding, while very helpful, can also be very constraining to these organizations. Expanding into earned income activities may mitigate its influence. In looking at these organization’s financial breakdowns, earned revenue comprises 16%-61% of their revenue.
The food pantries in this study do not have earned income revenue. The food bank has some earned revenue, from the shared maintenance fee paid by the pantries, but that only comprises 8% of their total budget. Affordable housing organizations have been much more effective in leveraging earned income opportunities than food pantries as a result of the variety of services that affordable housing organizations provide. In developing affordable housing, there is no intention that that housing must be free. This is different from emergency food, which is assumed to be free, and which must be free to continue to procure donations from private businesses. Since food pantries’ work consists of redistributing food, built in opportunities for simple fee for service provisions simply are not possible. Without earned income revenue streams, food pantries cannot diversify their funding as much and may struggle to identify regular and stable sources of funds. Grant time periods end and individual donors stop donating, meaning that pantries are always looking for new sources of funds. Earned income revenue streams are vital to the affordable housing organizations’ ability to weather the most recent recession and to create opportunities for innovation, change, and influence in their organizational field.

**Competition and collaboration tensions:**

“Collaboration is the buzzword right now, everyone is looking for ways to collaborate” (1314). Within the food security and affordable housing organizational fields, each individual organization faces tensions in their inter-organizational relationships, be that via competition or collaboration.

Particularly in the food security field, many of my respondents articulated the tensions they sometimes confront in their collaborations with the food bank and with the
211 Food Line. The food security field collaborates in distributing clients to the pantry that can best serve them through the 211 Food Line. “211 has seen a big increase in pantry referrals” (1205). Most pantries require clients to call this line, administered by HandsOn Central Ohio, to schedule appointments at their respective pantries. This collaboration improves clients’ experiences with the pantries across the city, though it can be frustrating as well. As one respondent shared with me, “To get a full appointment, you actually have to call our partner program, HandsOn. So they schedule our appointments for us. It’s terribly, terribly difficult to get an appointment. You can sit on hold for up to two hours just to be told that there are no more appointments left” (1325). She further shared that, “The system is frustrating, I can totally relate. If you’re on the phone for two hours and you’ve used all your minutes only to be told you can’t have an appointment is frustrating” (1325). Successful organizational collaborations still do not always benefit prospective clients in helping them to get access to food.

The food bank serves as a social closure mechanism in the field, which can create field tensions as well. It decides if a new emergency food provider can become a member agency of the food bank, a crucial food resource for organizational success. Food banks review applications to become member agencies and deny applications if they feel that some of their other member agencies are already meeting that need in that specific geographic area of the community. This is important because the food bank is attempting to minimize duplication of services within its service area, which it can do because it controls the resources in its organizational field. One food bank respondent described the process to me, saying, “we’re more selective with add-in sites because we do have quite a
few sites [in that metro area] but there are some areas that are still underserved, and so we look at their areas and see if there is a need for an additional one in that particular area. And if it is in an area that we feel is already inundated, we may suggest that they collaborate with other pantries that are already operating in those areas” (1324). Without the food banks’ stamp of approval to become a member agency, it would be very challenging to maintain a food pantry. The food bank also monitors member agencies to ensure their compliance with food safety rules and regulations.

Pantries also collaborate across their organizational population when possible. In terms of food storage collaboration, one coordinator of a large, well-resourced pantry told me, “we’re known if you order too much meat sometime [from the food bank], call us. We’ll make room for them if there’s room [in the off-site walk-in freezer] (1326). These kinds of collaborations and partnerships are enhanced through the personal relationships that pantry staff maintain with one another. One pantry coordinator described having regular coffee meetings with other local pantry coordinators to talk about what is going on at the pantries around town to stay abreast of developments in the field (1326).

Another respondent shared the importance of partnerships and collaboration, saying “We can’t work in silos, we have to be partnering and thinking about the best and most efficient way to do our work and I think a lot of times that means partnerships; we all need to work better in such a tough climate; even as the economy picks up, I don’t think we can go back to the good old days and just apply and get a grant; there is so much competition and there is more emphasis on outcomes and impacts and numbers” (1205). Additionally, in sharing best practices, pantries tell other pantries “to learn what they can
from us, but to be very aware of their local area” (1320) in terms of the resources available and the need to be met.

For all pantries, tensions and competition with the food bank exist from the perspective of funding and access to food. Multiple respondents described the tensions of their dependence on the food bank. From a funding perspective, a donation to a food pantry directly serves clients in the pantry’s service area. A donation to the food bank, though, directly serves a multi-county area and enhances its buying power, a benefit that is then passed on, indirectly, to member agencies like food pantries. As one respondent shared, “so we have an interesting relationship with Mid-Ohio Food Bank. It’s almost a friendly rivalry. We’re much smaller than they are and yet we are competing for the same dollars and donors. People think that if by donating to the food bank that we benefit from that and if we do it’s very indirect. We will get free produce from the food bank but most of what we get from them is purchased” (1220). While the food bank is the best option, its prices may still cause challenges for pantries, even if those prices are far lower than what they might procure on the open market. These organizations are constrained by the relationships and structures within their organizational field.

Affordable housing also experiences some competition and collaboration tensions as a field, though my affordable housing respondents spoke less about these than did my food pantry respondents. They did articulate, though, that as organizations, they compete for land and for funding, but that they also collaborate on projects regularly. So, for example, one respondent shared that in the affordable housing field, “the funds that come from HUD to the city, a percentage are designated for CHODOs only (Community
Housing Development Organizations) goes directly to the CHODO. It’s beneficial to the CHODOs if we partners with them to access those funds because they get to count it as their build and then they get administrative money and a developer’s fee from us. It helps sustain the CHODOs in their development work. It’s beneficial for us because then we have a contact in the community, they often act as a liaison for us in the community” (1314). So, in partnerships using federal government funds, the field is structured in such a way that collaboration leads to fees and funding for all the organizations involved and is mutually beneficial. Moreover, as a result of many collaborative opportunities, “it can be a challenge too because these collaboratives develop their collective identities and it can be very hard for organizations to have that institutional memory of remembering what their own start or purpose was as it evolves over time” (1319). So, while collaborations in the affordable housing sector are very important to the organizations themselves, the organizations are simultaneously trying to make sure that the collaboration doesn’t supersede their own priorities.

In terms of competition in the housing field, one respondent shared that, “No matter how you dice it, there are organizations, who are often your very best friends and colleagues, at the end of the day, you’re often competing for the very same pools of funding, so that’s hard and it’s very much, it becomes the embodiment of American culture. There is a competitiveness for funding that is there, regardless of whether you’re at a nonprofit or not” (1319). So while organizations might be collaborating on one project, they also may be competing to get funds for the next one.
Conclusion and Implications

This case study demonstrates that the food security and affordable housing fields are constrained by their organizational structures, organizational histories, and funding, all of which impact opportunities for innovation, change and influence within their field when faced with an exogenous shock. Moreover, this study suggests that researchers should take a nuanced approach in studies of the nonprofit sector by incorporating organizational fields, particularly such a broad area as social services, to understand more effectively how organizations confront, respond, and adapt to unexpected uncertainty within their organizational populations and organizational fields. Without looking at specific organizational populations and fields within the larger nonprofit sector field, one might conclude that all organizations struggled throughout the recession whereas the reality is that some organizations gained access to more funding, grew, and are in a strong position for their future. Both the affordable housing and food security fields contain organizations that experienced unprecedented growth in funding and staff as a result of the recession. We need to understand more thoroughly the constraints and opportunities for these organizations within their organizational fields, and others like them, to continue to assist them in achieving their mission in effective ways and to understand the heterogeneity of the sector. Considering the interactional space of the organizational field allows for direct discussion of power and influence within the field
(Martin 2003), enhancing our understanding of not only the field itself, but the general characteristics and constraints of the nonprofit sector.

This study shows the continued institutionalization of the food security and affordable housing organizational fields in U.S. society and how their location within their fields impacts their ability to fulfill their missions. Hunger and housing are huge poverty alleviation issues in the United States, so understanding the fields in which they operate sheds light on the work of thousands of organizations across the country as they work to fulfill their missions and can help researchers to understand the challenging tensions inherent in charitable efforts. In understanding these differing organizational fields within the broad nonprofit sector and social services, researchers can gain more leverage in our conception of fields and the ways in which they impact the actions of organizations and their clients. As this study demonstrated, nonprofit affordable housing organizations’ field level characteristics made it possible for them achieve more funding stability than food pantries, even in the midst of a severe exogenous shock. Particularly as the United States recovers from the Great Recession, continuing to make the case for maintained funding levels of both kinds of organizations will become even more important in ensuring their perseverance as organizations. As funding moves to the next priority issue area, affordable housing and food security organizations could face severe field constraints. Continued instability within their organizational fields could lead to more organizational opportunities for influence and change within their fields and how they deliver critical social services, leading potentially to a long term cycle of instability.
References


Appendix A: Figures
Figure 1. Food Security Funding and Affiliation Structure
Affordable Housing Funding and Affiliations

- National Organization or Affiliate
- Federal Government
- Private Donations and Grants
- State & Local Governments

Membership Dues

State Housing Finance Authority

Affordable Housing Organizations

Earned Income Revenue Streams

Figure 2. Affordable Housing Funding and Affiliation Structure