

Religious, Civic, and Interpersonal Capital: Catholic Sisters in One Community's Response to Migrant Families

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Abstract

How do communities organize public response to the challenges of diversity? My research uses archival data, content analysis, and interviews with Catholic sisters and other leaders across a spectrum of religious and civic organizations serving migrant families in a medium-sized city in the Midwestern United States. Earlier analysis revealed that the traditional charisms of Catholic women's congregations and Catholic sisters' embeddedness in inter-congregational networks incite their ministries to migrant families today. In this paper I substantiate that, even in the face of declining demographics, Catholic sisters and their congregations have leveraged social networks across Catholic archdiocese and other faiths, as well as business, education, government, journalism, philanthropic, and social service organizations into critical policy-relevant social capital on behalf of migrant families.

My research in Bluffton¹ offers implications for communities seeking to serve the common good in the twenty-first century. Yet the work of securing the position of migrant families in Bluffton remains unfinished. Hence, I pose questions involving what communities may need to do to maintain the momentum for addressing critical social problems in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

In the last decades of the twentieth century, when it came to race relations, Bluffton was much like other medium-sized cities in the Midwestern United States. Predominantly white and comfortable in Western European traditions dating from the middle of the nineteenth century, Bluffton experienced massive lay-offs by the city's largest employers. The few people of color who lived in Bluffton were viewed by some white citizens with suspicion, as possible competition for blue-collar jobs, and as sources of the kind of violence that had struck other larger American cities. Perhaps then the cross-burnings and bricks thrown through black residents' windows in 1989 and the subsequent visit to Bluffton by the national director of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)² were not a surprise³ (Karraker 1987).

¹ Throughout this paper the names of individuals, the city, the state, and the Catholic women's communities have all been concealed for confidentiality.

² Bluffton was not alone in receiving the attentions of the KKK. In the last half of the twentieth century, the United Klans of America had active organizations not only in southern states but also in Delaware, Indiana, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania (House UnAmerican Activities Committee 1965, reported in Dobratz and Shanks-Meile 1997).

³ Archival news sources on this period in Bluffton's history were drawn from *ABC News*, the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, and *U.S. News & World Report* items posted on the World Wide Web and retrieved February 20, 2011. Other items were provided to the author by the current editor of the Archdiocese newspaper. Compliant with IRB requirements for confidentiality, I have not included specific references.

What is engaging from a public policy perspective about Bluffton is that community's response to racism. First, a group of civic leaders recognized that their city projected a very negative image as a closed, prejudiced, racist community. These leaders then mobilized the community through a task force around successful integration, marshalling a plan that included community education and the recruitment of 100 families of color within five years. Along the way, Bluffton enlisted commitment across a broad swath of the community, from city employees to Girl Scouts, from 300 businesses to the city's newspaper. Of course, not everyone in Bluffton endorsed these efforts. Some were quite outspoken and a few took violent action around their opposition to the proposed changes. However, Bluffton's head of the city's civil rights office (himself black), told representatives of the national media that *the difference between Bluffton and big cities like Chicago was that Bluffton had the guts to do something about racism.*

The ability of communities like Bluffton to mobilize successfully in the face of demographic and societal change is no small feat of social engineering. While early national news accounts did not cite the Catholic Church or religious leaders' roles in Bluffton's civic regeneration, the Catholic Archbishop of Bluffton called on Christians to approach events at the time with courage, targeting the sin of racism in *our churches, homes, schools, and society* (Archbishop of Bluffton 1991). The archdiocese also produced and aired public service announcements on local television stations and sponsored ecumenical services in Bluffton on human rights and racism.

Catholic sisters⁴ were commanding voices speaking against racism and in favor of human rights across the United States during the twentieth century. While some Catholic women's congregations⁵ had struggled with discrimination in their own treatment of black women seeking membership,⁶ Catholics as a group and even communities of sisters had also been targets of prejudice and even violence by the KKK.⁷

Members of Bluffton congregations were active in the Civil Rights movement. Some sisters experienced verbal abuse and even injury as they marched alongside blacks in larger cities. Sisters and their congregations were early and prominent members of committees formed to address Bluffton's struggles with diversity and racism (*Encyclopedia Bluffton* 2010). Sisters partnered with the local NAACP, the Human Rights Commission, and other organizations around specific projects, including opening and staffing multicultural centers to serve the black and growing Hispanic populations of Bluffton. In 1991 a consortium of women's religious congregations in Bluffton published a page in the daily newspaper stating their commitment to

⁴ Sisters, formerly known as nuns, are also known as women religious.

⁵ Hereafter called simply "congregations," except when referring to the single monastery in Bluffton, which is referred to as an "order."

⁶ Interview with author. January 20, 2009.

⁷ Well into the twentieth century, Catholics, including sisters and their communities, were among those attacked by the KKK, sometimes provoking just the opposite of effect intended by the Klan. For example, in one case a cross was burned across the road from a monastery, but townspeople and civil authorities rose to the sister's defense (Carmelites of Eldridge 2011). For an illustrative analysis of anti-Catholic prejudice and confrontation between the KKK and one congregation, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in Texas, see Fossey and Morris (2010).

work to eliminate the sin of racism in ourselves, our congregations, our institutions, and in other structures of Church and society.

Today, again like other cities its size in the Midwest, Bluffton confronts problems of educating, employing, and serving the needs of an ever more diverse population, a population that increasingly includes immigrants from across the globe. In 2012 Bluffton will celebrate its twentieth breakfast in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (a breakfast first organized and hosted by one of the congregations in Bluffton), presenting awards in support of diversity to youth and adults, businesses, and organizations. Less than a decade old, one ministry founded by one of the Bluffton congregations has served immigrants to the city from over three dozen different countries from five continents.⁸ The role of sisters in weaving such a vibrant civic tapestry is intriguing and testimony to their leadership and organizational skills, as well as their resolute connection to the people they serve and their abiding commitment to their faith-based values around welcoming those who the Gospels refer to as *the stranger in our midst*.

This paper is part of a larger research endeavor which uses archival data, content analysis, and interviews to explore the place of sisters and their congregations in the broader religious and civil society of an archtypical community. In an earlier paper I reported that *charism*⁹ predicts contemporary ministries to migrant women and their families (Karraker 2010a). Congregations that have had long-standing traditions in education, health care, and social service ministries, especially to immigrant Catholics, express contemporary charisms in ministries to migrants. Today those ministries are executed without regard for the immigrants' faiths and sending countries. The same paper also confirmed that nothing trumps demographic decline. A congregation can no longer provide human capital to social ministries when their numbers and members' ages reach a critical point.

In another paper I reported that all six Catholic women's communities in Bluffton are represented in two forms of inter-congregational networks (Karraker 2010b). First, every congregational leader I interviewed from the six communities was a member of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Founded in 1956, the 1500-member LCWR (2007) represents the congregations and orders of more than 90 percent of the 59,000 sisters in the United States. The mission of the LCWR is explicitly collaborative, corporate, and mutually supportive, offering resource materials on religious leadership skills.

Second, in the same paper I reported that all six communities, including the smallest congregation and the contemplative order, have at least nominal membership in an internet-based network SET. With a mission aimed at *maximum impact and mutual support...[while] promoting the values of Catholic Sisters living the Gospel in today's world* (SET 2009), SET has been a primary mechanism for communicating information around issues of peace and justice, including immigration issues. SET has produced radio spots and commissioned billboards in support of migrant concerns in the area. In 2008 SET was instrumental in mobilizing its inter-

⁸ Email from the Director to the author, March 23, 2011.

⁹ Charism refers to the spiritual mission given by God through the foundress to congregations and orders. Passed across generations of sisters, a congregation's charism may be renamed or refocused over time (SET 2010).

congregational network to provide support during a raid by Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE) against migrant workers in a meat-packing plant in a small town elsewhere in the region (McCauley 2008; Strandberg 2008).

Current Research Questions

In the present paper I analyze quantitative and qualitative data on the social networks and social capital of sisters in Bluffton. I examine the interplay between congregations and broader religious and civic networks in Bluffton. Specifically, I am interested in how, in the face of the demographic decline mentioned earlier, congregations leverage social networks to create social capital with broader religious and civic networks in their work on behalf of migrant families. Hence, this paper seeks to answer two questions:

1. What is the position of sisters and their congregations in broader religious and civic networks?
2. What are the quantitative and qualitative features of the social capital of sisters and their congregations?

Significance of the Research

This research contributes to scholarship on organizations and social capital, especially around gender; religion, and responses to immigration. First, with few exceptions (e.g., Juteau and Laurin 1986; Pattison 1981), sociology has attempted only limited application to the study of the “small worlds” (Watts 1999; Watts and Strogatz 1998) of women’s organizations. The research described in this paper offers a timely focus on cultures and networks in a decidedly female-led type of organization, Catholic women’s congregations.

Second, as revealed in the work of Putnam (2000), Wuthnow (1998), and others, the assets, associations, and attachments of religious organizations and their incumbents are of growing interest in the study of networks and capital. However, the networks and capital of sisters have received little such attention. Such inattention is unfortunate, as these organizations, whose incumbents—rank and file as well as leaders—operate with gendered distinction within the larger male-dominated Roman Catholic Church, an institution which itself has a deeply vested interest in immigration for both theological and demographic reasons.

Third, values and norms around outsiders and the stranger have challenged societies throughout history and across geographies, absorbing the imaginations of sociologists, including Simmel, Park, and others (Karraker 2004, 2006). However, by engaging immigration as a critical transnational social agenda sisters confront the “often acrimonious debate about the seemingly intractable problem” (Hayes 2001,1) of conflicting norms and values in society surrounding immigrants. Finally, this research concentrates on services provided to women and their families at a pivotal point in the global history of migration, at a point of the feminization of poverty (Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Karraker Forthcoming 2012).

Background

Catholic Women's Congregations and Social Action

Education, health care, and social welfare have been the three traditional social ministries embraced by Catholic women's congregations.¹⁰ Across and beyond those three areas, sisters and their congregations have been critical change agents in broader social movements. They educated children, including immigrants, girls, and African Americans, when no one else would do so. They provided health care to both sides during the American Civil War and during polio epidemics. They opened orphanages to provide for abandoned children and refuges to shelter abused women.

Sisters and their congregations are often cited for their willingness to address the most pressing social needs, listening and responding rather than imposing their own beliefs. In "Grace on the Margins," Jamie Manson (2011), award-winning journalist for the *National Catholic Reporter* has written, "The sisters asked first how they could be of service, and then created their mission around these needs."

In the civic sector, sisters have held important elected and appointed political offices on the local, state, and national levels. As testimony to the esteem in which they are held, the Smithsonian exhibition "Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America" (Leadership Conference of Women Religious 2011) includes letters from Presidents Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln praising sisters' good works.

This reach of sisters is global. For example, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd (2011), with ministries in 70 countries around the world, are a prime example of the global reach of sisters. Inspired by words of their foundress St. Mary Euphrasia, "One person is of more value than a world," ministries of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd offer a range of human services and act for social justice on behalf of those in the greatest need, with a particular emphasis on women and children, the effects of the feminization of poverty, and human trafficking. Likewise, inter-congregational organizations, many based in Rome with close ties to the Vatican, are engaged in direct service to victims of sex trafficking, while engaging in provocative advocacy to end sex trafficking worldwide. The Working Group on Trafficking in Women and Children of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) Commission of the Unions of the Superiors General (USG/UISG) is one such group.

Serving 'the Stranger in Our Midst'

Sisters have long been powerful witnesses on behalf of migrant peoples. Of course, the call to minister on behalf of immigrants is deeply embedded in many religious teachings. The three Abrahamic faiths all have moral imperatives to welcome the stranger. The *Torah* and Old Testament¹¹ include both negative and positive commandments regarding the stranger.

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt
(Exodus 22:21).

¹⁰ For exemplary work on these ministries, see for example Fraser (1999), McCauley (2005), and Terpstra (2005).

¹¹ Biblical passages are taken from the New Revised Standard (Anglicized Edition) (Oremus 2010)

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:19).

In the New Testament book of Matthew 25:35, Jesus instructs his disciples:

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

As offered in The Cow (2:215), the *Qur'an* admonishes all to act with charity toward those who are hungry, poor, and in need, including the stranger.

These teachings are the foundation for what Lutheran theologian Martin Marty (2009) has termed immigration ethics. Protestants and Catholics take inspiration for care of the stranger not only in scriptural teaching, but also in their own histories as immigrant churches in America. Catholic social teaching extends the same biblical texts, including the nativity story in which Mary and Joseph must take refuge in a stable, where the infant Jesus was born. Thus, for Catholics and other Christians, welcoming the stranger is welcoming Christ. In fact, in 2000 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB 2011) took “welcoming the stranger among us” as the theme for their call to serve immigrants and refugees and issued a major position paper *Strangers No More*, co-authored by the Catholic Bishops of Mexico and the United States (2003).

In American cities a dominant model for providing social services tends toward a centralized one, with governmental bodies at the federal, state, and municipal levels charged with providing care to vulnerable populations and other elements in the civil society “filling in the gaps.” In some other societies (e.g., Italy) care of immigrants and indeed most social services are much more decentralized, with religious organizations playing a decidedly more central part in service delivery. Yet the struggle to manage responses to and responsibilities for migrants occurs with decreasing economic capital from ever-more-strained tax bases and non-profit resources.

Communities facing such challenges must effectively rally resources, including strong collaboration with religious organizations. For example, Catholic Charities USA, a “professional association and social justice movement” is the largest private network of providers of social services in the United States, serving over 9 million people each year, regardless of religious background (Catholic Charities USA 2011). Further, in some communities, Catholic Charities has become the largest provider, religious or otherwise.

Consistent with their historical charisms, sisters and their ministries, operating on the slimmest of budgets, with personnel who perform their duties with no direct compensation, remain profoundly relevant in this global, post-modern century. As global migration and its consequences have moved toward the front of Catholic social justice agenda in the twenty-first century (Magray 1998, Neal 1990), Catholic women’s congregations’ place in serving the dispossessed has been described as nothing short of “prophetic” (*Union Superiore Maggiori d’Italia* 2007).

At the turn of the millennium, President George W. Bush’s administration began to promote faith-based social welfare initiatives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2009). While the recent growing emphasis on faith-based initiatives as a means to deliver social services remains contentious (see Sager 2011, Seuss-Kennedy and Bielefeld 2005, Wuthnow 2004, and Wuthnow,

Hackett, and Hsu 2004), such initiatives are not new for women's congregations. In fact, I argue that Catholic women's congregations represent one of the earliest forms of faith-based initiatives to address pressing social problems.

Social Networks and Social Capital in Civil Society

“The hidden power of social networks” offers a powerful framework for understanding how the work of organizations really gets done (Cross 2004). Social network analysis emphasizes concepts such as assets (Cohen and Prusak 2001), centrality (Freeman 1979), embeddedness (Granovetter 1985), and lines of communication (Rice and Richards 1985). Social capital is created by networks among actors who can then broker that capital into economic, political, or social advantage. Social capital involves connections, as well as trust, obligation, and dependency on exchange with others in the network (Burt 2001). Thus, social networks and the capital networks create can provide stable relationships that can be brokered to social advantage (Coleman 1988).

Certain characteristics of social networks affect the likelihood that support will be extended from one actor to another. While Granovetter (1973) has written of the “strength of weak ties,” strong ties among network actors are more likely to result in aid and support (Wellman and Frank 2001). Furthermore, strong ties tend to become stronger over time (Wellman et al. 1997). Ties among coworkers, mutual ties (which connect the actor to another through a cluster of ties), and ties in larger networks are also more likely to result in support than ties without those characteristics (Wellman and Frank 2001).

Research in Australia, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States and other primarily Western societies has confirmed that social networks among civic organizations play pivotal roles for the common good in civil society (Baldassarri and Diani, 2007; Daly 2006; Edwards, Foley and Diani 2001; Putnam 2000; Putnam et al. 1993; Warren 2001; Wuthnow 1998). I share Padgett and Ansell's (2005) interest in how new organizational forms develop out of economic, political, and social structures, often stimulated by social networks. I also extend their admonition that “to understand state formation one must penetrate beneath the veneer of formal institutions, groups, and goals down to the relational substrata of peoples' actual lives” (p. 1259). Further, deeper penetration to examine interpersonal relationships can facilitate even deeper understanding of the ways a community organizes itself.

Research suggests that social networks and social capital on behalf of the common good—Wuthnow's (1991) “acts of compassion, caring for others and helping ourselves”—in civil society have their basis in long-standing traditions. For example, Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993) found that regions in Italy that had effective government in the 1990s had traditions of civic engagement harkening back to the early middle Ages. I suspect that the same civic traditions of association, cooperation, and, most of all, trust that Putnam and his colleagues found to facilitate economic prosperity and good government in twentieth century Italy facilitate care of migrant families in twenty-first century Bluffton.

Research Methodology

I follow Lin, Cook and Burt's (2001, viii) recommendation that research on social capital must be "multimethod, multilevel, and multisite." The larger project on which this paper is based employs archival, content analysis, and interview data. In this paper I report on the results of interviews conducted over a 15-month period between late fall 2009 and winter 2011.

I interviewed both sisters who were directors of ministries serving migrant women and their families and sisters who served on their congregation's leadership team¹². The first group of sisters (N=4) provided rich information concerning congregationally-sponsored ministries to migrant women and their families in Bluffton. The second group of sisters (N=8), which included two abbesses and eight present and former congregational presidents and vice presidents, provided the congregational context for the aforementioned ministries. The 15 reputational informants I interviewed were in positions of middle-to-upper management, often executive, positions in organizations representing the spectrum of civil society: business, education, government, journalism, philanthropy, and social service. Reputational informants also included clergy in the broader Catholic Church, as well as clergy and lay leaders among Jews and the largest Protestant denomination in Bluffton. To date, I have a 100 percent response rate.

Findings

Bluffton: "Jewel on the River"

Bluffton is the pseudonym for a picturesque, medium-sized city in a state in the Midwestern United States. Founded in 1788, Bluffton is the oldest city in the state (*City of Bluffton* 2010). Viewed from the river on which it was founded or from the bluffs from which her pseudonym for the paper is taken, Bluffton is a pretty city with clean streets, neat neighborhoods, and an almost palpable sense of civic pride evidenced in her restored downtown, lovely Victorian homes, and accessible public art and recreational areas.

With a current population of just under 60,000, Bluffton has always been and remains overwhelmingly white (94 percent) and native born (98 percent) in a state that is the same (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). However, change is on Bluffton's doorstep. The most recent Census reveals that the state experienced a four percent increase in population. More than half of that increase was due to growth in the Hispanic population (Schulte 2011).

Blacks and Hispanics who live in Bluffton are over 5.8 and 4.2 times, respectively, as likely as whites to be poor. In fact, while the percentage of whites living in poverty is quite similar in Bluffton to both the state and the nation, blacks and Hispanics are considerably more likely to be poor in Bluffton than in either the state or the nation. In Bluffton, 61 percent and 45 percent of blacks and Hispanics are poor, while in the state 36 percent and 23 percent are poor and in the United States 25 percent and 21 percent are poor.

¹² A leadership team is usually composed of a president and council, who are elected to govern the congregation (SET 2010).

Nationally, almost 9 out of every 10 residents of the United States are native-born. The percentages of native-born residents in the state (96 percent) and especially in Bluffton (98 percent) are even higher. Yet the percentage of foreign-born residents who are naturalized citizens is considerably lower in Bluffton than in either the state or the United States.

The Catholic Church in Bluffton

The city of Bluffton is located in the greater Bluffton Archdiocese and Catholic identification has been among the more stable demographics of the city. The Association of Religion Data Archives (2000) estimates the number of Catholics in Bluffton at 65 percent of the total population. Some informed sources, taking into account marriages that end in divorce (and which may be associated with lower church attendance) and parish closings over the last few years, put the number closer to 60 percent.¹³

With its 10 parish churches¹⁴, the Catholic Church has had and continues to have a highly visible and influential presence in the civic life of Bluffton. Bluffton has five K-12 Catholic schools (plus four Catholic child care centers). One of the two (and the oldest) hospitals in Bluffton was founded by a Catholic women's congregation and today is sponsored by Catholic Healthcare Ministries. Catholic Charities of Bluffton (which serves individuals in the Archdiocese, regardless of religious affiliation) is the largest single provider of social services in the city and broader Bluffton area, with programs for adoption, counseling, disaster relief, social justice, and refugee resettlement and immigration (Archdiocese of Bluffton 2010).

Six Catholic Women's Communities¹⁵

From Bluffton's earliest years, sisters and their communities have been a vital part of the city's religious and civic life. Of the six communities of women's religious which call Bluffton home, one was founded in 1964 as a monastery (a cloistered, contemplative order). That order remains cloistered today and in 2011 had 23 sisters, including one junior professed sister¹⁶, living in the abbey in Bluffton (Archdiocese of Bluffton 2010). Another congregation has very active ministries around the world (i.e., in Bolivia, Mexico, Trinidad & Tobago, and Rome), but most of the sisters in that congregation who live in the Bluffton-area abbey are retired and no longer active in social ministries. A third congregation, called to Bluffton in 1871 by the city's first archbishop to establish a school for young women, now has only five members.

The remaining three congregations, with 131 to 488 living members, today provide ministries around education, health care, and social services to Bluffton's residents. These contemporary ministries are in keeping with the traditional charisms of each of the

¹³ Private telephone conversation with author, January 24, 2011.

¹⁴ The most recent closing, in 2010, was of a historically-German parish located in the historical central part of the city.

¹⁵ Data on the membership and charisms of each of the six communities in Bluffton is drawn from the individual communities' websites on September 30, 2009 and February 15, 2011 and from e-mails to the author from sisters charged with maintaining those statistics for each congregation or order.

¹⁶ A junior professed sister is one who, following a period of temporary vows, may pronounce her final vows as a member of the congregation.

congregations. However, those charisms are expressed in striking twenty-first century vernacular, in terms of *peace and justice; work with and among the culturally oppressed of the United States and Honduras; and service to the marginalized, especially Hispanics.*

Bluffton's congregations reflect the demographic decline among congregations in the United States. By 2011 the six congregations with an abbey or motherhouse¹⁷ in the immediate Bluffton area (Archdiocese of Bluffton 2010)¹⁸ ranged considerably in number of members, with the smallest having 6 and the largest having 554 vowed.¹⁹ Most telling, however, are the mean ages of sisters in those congregations. Excluding the cloistered order (which has a much lower mean age of 59, typical of contemplative orders today), the mean ages of sisters in the other five congregations ranges from 72 to 79, a mean across the five congregations of 76.

Social Networks: Sisters, Congregations and the Broader Religious and Civil Communities

Like others in the field, I have not come completely to terms with social capital as either an organizational (collective) or a personal (individual) asset. In most cases in this study, the intended unit of analysis is the congregation. However, not surprisingly, in the course of this research not only congregations but certain individual sisters in those congregations were revealed to be pivotal nodes in social networks in Bluffton.

Sisters in Bluffton very often referenced not only the work of other congregations but also organizations across the broader Catholic Church (e.g., Catholic Charities in Bluffton). After referencing other sisters, individual sisters most frequently referenced the current archbishop as the individual who has taken leadership on both strategic and pastoral initiatives around migration. Civic leaders, including a recent Director of Bluffton's Human Rights Commission, were also frequently noted as playing significant roles in serving migrant women and children in Bluffton. Most significantly for this research, those positive references—between sisters and the archbishop and between sisters and civic leaders—are mutual.

Some reputational informants for the Bluffton congregations were not always clear on the actual congregations or the specific sisters involved in ministries on behalf of women and children. However, the same informants were universally familiar with the work of what they often referred to as “the sisters,” even when they were not sure to which congregation or even which sister was involved.

Embeddedness in inter-congregational, but also broader religious, civic, and other social networks may be even more important to the existence of ministries serving migrant women and children today than in the past. In sum, strong social networks are not only present, but may be playing an increasing, formalized role in mobilizing human capital among congregations.

¹⁷ A motherhouse is the headquarters of a religious community, often providing not only residence for the sisters, but also administrative offices for the congregational leaders. A monastery is the headquarters of a cloistered order.

¹⁸ Five of these communities have motherhouses in the city limits of Bluffton. A sixth is located a short distance (10 miles) across a river in an adjacent state, but still within the Archdiocese.

¹⁹ Some sisters, especially in the larger communities, do not live full-time in Bluffton, but serve ministries in other cities in the United States and abroad.

Sisters' Social Capital

Of course, the sisters involved in congregational leadership for the three most active congregations were quite familiar with the work of sisters in their congregations. Those same congregational leaders also easily named sisters in other congregations and credited the work of other congregations. Likewise, other religious and civic leaders had no difficulty responding to an open-ended question by offering the names of sisters who were making an impact on the lives of migrant women and children in Bluffton. In fact, the names of the same three sisters were offered by one third of the reputational respondents as exemplars of citizens of Bluffton who are making a difference in the lives of migrant women and their families.

While the quantity and quality of their ministries differ, sisters and their congregations are held in extremely high regard by members of the broader religion and civil community. This very highly favorable reputation is confirmed by data based on three seven-point Likert-scale type indicators:

1. If I knew a migrant woman, child, or family who needed assistance, I would refer them to a program run by Catholic sisters.
2. Catholic sisters have a reputation for doing good work in our community.
3. Our community is a better place because of the work of Catholic sisters.

The modal and median responses for each of the three questions were all 7. A composite score based the sum of responses to those three questions, yielded a mean score of 20.2 (out of a maximum possible score of 21), with median and modal scores of 20.5 and 21. Clearly, sisters are held in universally high repute among other religious and civic leaders in Bluffton.

I considered two other quantitative factors in determining the reputation of sisters in Bluffton. First, I solicited opinions regarding the extent to which sisters are perceived to be well connected with other organizations that serve migrant women, children, and families in Bluffton. On that factor, members of the broader religious and civic community expressed less agreement than on the three questions discussed earlier, but only very slightly less so. The median responses on the question regarding the extent to which sisters are perceived to be well connected was 6, but the modal response remained at 7, as on the other three questions.

The second additional quantitative factor is the extent to which the work of sisters is known. Members of the broader religious and civic community expressed the least agreement of the five statements. Although the median response on this fifth question was a bit lower (5.0) than on the first three questions, the modal response again remained at 7.0. I suspect that this finding reflects less on the reputation of sisters than uncertainty about how much the respondent thinks others know about the work of sisters. In fact, when asked their opinion of the deficits sisters bring to their ministries, respondent's frequently cited sisters' modesty regarding their accomplishments. One respondent even suggested that such modesty might impede collaborations, as others are not well informed about sisters' efforts and capabilities.

I then calculated a summary reputation score based on all five indicators. Even taking into account the qualifications on the last two factors, the mean reputational score was very high, 30.6 (out of a possible 35), with median and modal scores of 31 and 29. Again, all evidence

points to the very high esteem in which sisters, their congregations, and their work are held in Bluffton.

Further, although the sample sizes for Protestants and especially Jews are very small (N=4 and N=2, respectively), these admittedly-limited data do not suggest differences between Catholics and members of the two other faiths or for participants who were affiliated with religious or other organizations on the reputation of sisters, with one possible exception. Regarding their sense that professionals working in the area do not know much about the work of sisters, on the average Catholics (median=6, mode=6) were most likely to respond that others do not know much after the work of sisters. Responses from the four Protestants (median=5.5, mode=4,7) were similar to those of Catholics, but responses from the two Jews (median=1.5, mode=1,2) were in lowest agreement (i.e., professionals do know much about the work of Catholic sisters). Again, the sample sizes, especially for Jews, are too small to make any conclusive judgments about differences between persons of different faiths, but may suggest further research is warranted on the quantity of differences in impressions of the work of sisters, as well as the quality of those responses.

Likewise, those affiliated with religious (N=10) versus civic institutions (N=5) suggest some differences. Those in the religious sector show lower agreement (median=3.0, mode=3) than those in the civic sector (N=5, median=6.7, mode=7) regarding the extent to which the work of sisters is known. Perhaps this again reflects a general sense by those affiliated with religious organizations that the work of religious folk are not sufficiently known (or appreciated).

However, other qualitative indicators suggests to the contrary: the work of sisters is recognized and held in high esteem in Bluffton. During the time I was collecting data in Bluffton, a Catholic sister was named Bluffton's Outstanding Citizen by the daily newspaper. Another was selected by a local seminary to receive an award for her work with migrants. A third was given an award by business and civic leaders for her work around inclusion for Hispanics in the tri-state area. Just as telling is the extent in interviews to which specific sisters (and sometimes their congregations) were cited by name for their service to migrant women and children in Bluffton and to the well being of Bluffton's less fortunate citizens in general.

Summary

Five of the six Catholic women's communities active in Bluffton at the time of the study had histories which emphasized ministries in education, healthcare, and/or other social welfare areas. Three of these five congregations had active ministries in Bluffton to migrant women and families at the time of the study. All six congregations have at least nominal membership in inter-congregational associations, but involvement is highest among the three most active congregations. While the quantity and quality of their ministries differ, the three active congregations are held in very high esteem for their work with migrant women and children, both by one another and by reputational informants. In sum, while congregational culture counts, congregations' ministries to migrant women and families pivot around inter-

congregational as well as broader religious and civic networks, generating a remarkable degree of social capital for sisters in this predominantly-though not entirely-Catholic city.

Discussion

Clearly then, Catholic sisters are what Padgett and Ansell (2005) have called “robust actors” in this community. The comment of one civic leader, “Bluffton loves her sisters!” effectively sums up the esteem in which sisters and their congregations are held in this community. Bluffton’s sisters have powerful inter-congregational, religious, and civic networks. Sisters enjoy the kind of strong ties that enable them to leverage impressive capital in pursuit of the common good, even in trying times.

Bluffton, located in the Midwestern United States, stands in marked contrast to communities in some other predominantly Catholic societies. Putnam, Leonardi and Nanetti’s (1997, 107) offered that “Organized religion, at least in Catholic Italy, is an alternative to the civic community, not a part of it.” In marked contrast, in Bluffton organized religion has long been and remains an integral part of the civic community. In part this reflects the Catholic Church’s dominant position in the history of Bluffton, as well as the Church’s call to almost two-thirds of Bluffton’s citizens. The Church and her teachings—and especially the sisters claimed by her—are key institutions in the civic life of Bluffton.

The centrality of sisters and their congregations suggests another difference between late-twentieth century Italy and twenty-first century Bluffton. While Putnam and his colleagues accurately described the place of the Church in Italian society as emphasizing ecclesiastical hierarchy and obedience, Bluffton’s Catholic Church in the twenty-first century reflects a more horizontally-integrated structure. While the archbishop of Bluffton is unmistakably the man in charge, the esteem in which he and others hold sisters and their ministries—and the historic reliance of the church on sisters’ human and social capital—stands in marked contrast to the Church in Putnam’s Italy. In Bluffton religious identification and civic engagement are visibly compatible, stretching even across religious identities, as revealed by the Jewish and Protestant interview participants who are active in interfaith immigration concerns and who, like their Catholic counterparts, hold sisters and their congregations in the highest esteem.

The sentiments expressed by one reputational informant, a journalist (and a Catholic), testifies to the place of these women in Bluffton.

Sisters take on social concerns around Gospel teaching for ‘the least of these’ when no one else will.

The key place of sisters in social networks serving migrant women and children in Bluffton does confirm one of Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti’s (1993, 8) central tenets:

Institutions are shaped by history. Whatever other factors may affect their form, institutions have inertia and “robustness.”

In the words of one Protestant clergy in Bluffton:

To a one, sisters are deeply invested in the communities they serve.

Bluffton, with her sisters, corroborates Putnam's image of the civic community, characterized by many voluntary organizations, citizen engagement in community affairs (including those reported in the daily press), and a sense of mutual trust among citizens and of citizens for government leaders. Still, the civic leaders of Bluffton do not romanticize sisters and their work. When asked what deficits sisters bring to their work, two informants, notably non-Catholics, noted that some sisters have a "conservative political orientation" that sometimes makes collaboration difficult. Others among the Jewish and Protestant respondents specifically cited sisters' position on right-to-life (i.e., abortion) issues as an additional hurdle to further collaboration.

Thus, this research holds significance for sociologies of gender, religion, and immigration, as well as the study of social networks in organizations. Further, as organizations that step into the brink to meet the needs of the immigrants, especially women and their families, the focus in this research on sisters and their congregations is most fitting. Yet, my opportunity to shine a light on these women and their organizations as key players in the forum of public policy comes at a critical time in their history. Of course, throughout history Catholic religious orders have undergone significant periods of growth and decline, often triggered by political or economic changes in secular society (Wittberg 1964). However, the precipitous drop in the number of women joining (and remaining in) congregations that commenced in the 1960s have resulted in not only fewer sisters but a dramatically aging population for congregations, leaving less human capital to accomplish good works on behalf of the common good.

The residents of Bluffton are well aware of these demographics. Declining vocations was the 'deficit' cited by the most (one third) reputational informants. Fifteen years ago the medium age for American sisters was 65 and 3 percent were 40 or younger; 37 percent were older than 70, and 12 percent were more than 80. Today the mean ages of contemplative and apostolic sisters in the United States are 65 and 69, respectively. As reported earlier in this paper, the mean age across women's religious communities in Bluffton is even higher. The numbers of sisters are rapidly dwindling, from approximately 180,000 in 1965 to less than 80,000 at the start of the millennium, a drop of 54 percent (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate 2001). Although the Directory of the Archdiocese of Bluffton (2010-2011) reported 703 sisters in the entire archdiocese (again, which covers approximately one quarter of the state, of which Bluffton is only a part), that population is rapidly aging. Patricia Wittberg, a prominent sociologist (and sister) who studies sisters and their congregations said at that time, *American Catholics have no idea how very soon there will be no nuns* (Stammer 1994). To understand, conserve, and pass on what are becoming clear to me are some best practices from the work of these organizational unique and socially critical organizations, we need more research on their work—soon.

Finally, Bluffton's civic achievements—including the social networks and social capital—of the last few decades may yet be no match for the increasing complexity of diversity in the twenty-first century. Recall that the poverty rate for some of Bluffton's citizens is higher and the percentage of her citizens who are naturalized is lower than in either the state or in the United States. Has Bluffton's deep concern with the *stranger in our midst* been replaced by

other, also pressing issues? (Interviews with civic leaders suggest that one of those issues may be sustainability.) Have events like the annual Martin Luther King breakfast lost their deeper purpose? (One of the founding sisters suggested that the event may no longer serve its original purpose, having assumed more of a place of symbolic visibility for the white civic elite of Bluffton.) Are her citizens comfortable with pluralism, up to a point? (One respondent referred to “tolerating newcomers, without having to live next door to them.”)

In spite of declining demographics among Catholic sisters, sociologists and others engaged in social scientific research, as well as others concerned with action for the common good, would do well to attend to the processes through which social capital (such as that possessed by sisters and other faith-based groups) is generated, maintained, and transferred. This is what Morgan (2011) phrased as the challenge to “ignite the fire in the heart” and therefore move toward meaningful social change. In light of these findings, and as a possible direction for future research, I ask if network and capital analysis is enough. Do we need to draw on some Durkheimian concepts around social solidarity—charism, in sisters’ terminology—to better understand the efforts of communities like Bluffton?

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²⁰ In this list of references “Karraker”, “Bluffton”, and “State”, as well as “Web site” are substituted for the factual name of readily-identifiable authors, the city, the state, and web sites. Those references are followed by *.

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