Rethinking Social Capital:
It’s Not Whom You Know; It’s Where You Know Them From

By Mario Luis Small
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SPEA 278
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Refreshments will be served.

Social capital theorists have shown that some people do better than others in part because they enjoy larger, more supportive, or otherwise more useful networks. But why do some people have better networks than others? In Unanticipated Gains Professor Small argues that the answer lies less in people’s deliberate “networking” than in the institutional conditions of the churches, colleges, firms, gyms, childcare centers, schools, and other organizations in which they happen to participate routinely.

He illustrates and develops this argument by exploring the experiences of New York City mothers whose children were enrolled in childcare centers. He finds that many of these mothers, after enrolling their children in centers, dramatically expanded both the size and usefulness of their personal networks, often in ways they did not expect. Whether, how, and how much the mothers’ networks were altered— and how useful these networks were—depended on apparently trivial but remarkably consequential practices and regulations of the centers, from the structure of their PTOs, to the regularity of fieldtrips to amusement parks and zoos, to their ostensibly innocuous rules regarding pick-up and drop-off times.

Relying on scores of in-depth interviews with mothers, quantitative data on both mothers and centers, and detailed case studies of other routine organizations (from beauty salons and bath houses to colleges and churches), Small shows that how much people gain from their connections depends substantially on institutional conditions they may not control and everyday process they may not even be aware of.

Mario Luis Small, Ph.D., 2001, Harvard University, is Professor of Sociology and the College at the University of Chicago. Small’s research has focused on neighborhood poverty, social capital and networks, inequality and culture, and case study methods. His work has been published in journals such as the American Journal of Sociology, Annual Review of Sociology, Social Forces, Theory and Society, and Social Science Quarterly.

Small is Associate Editor of the *American Journal of Sociology* and Editorial Board member of *Sociological Forum* and *Social Science Quarterly*. Small is currently studying the peer relations of schoolchildren in violent areas in Chicago, the mechanisms through which routine organizations structure social networks, and the dynamics under which everyday practice shapes how actors conceive of and use their social ties. 
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