“Without tiendas it’s a dead neighbourhood”: The socio-economic importance of small trade stores in Cochabamba, Bolivia

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Trade stores – small-scale, home-based shops selling daily household necessities – are ubiquitous across low income, urban neighbourhoods of developing countries. Surprisingly, while the informal economy literature on marketplaces and small-scale enterprises continues to expand, neighbourhood trade stores and their unique dynamics in urban environments remain comparatively overlooked. Through a qualitative case study focusing on the socio-economic dimensions of trade stores in a Bolivian neighbourhood, we reveal the complexity of their significance to the everyday micro-geographies of urban places. Not only are these shops essential outlets for routine wares but also, vis-à-vis a number of more nuanced roles, trade stores play a critical part in configuring the day-to-day survival and opportunities of local residents.

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Introduction

Ubiquitous on the urban residential landscapes of almost any developing country are small-scale variety shops specializing in the retail of foodstuffs and household items. These home-based ventures, operated primarily by women traders, provide domestic provisions to near-by residents in very small quantities for immediate use, such as a single egg, a packet of soup base, or several pieces of bread (see Tokman, 1978; Dannhaeuser, 1980; Silverio, 1982; Bonnin, 2006). Neighbourhood trade stores¹ are vital in the wider schemes of urban food trade for their role in supplying essential commodities within the limited economic and spatial reach of the day-to-day purchasing capacities of low income households (cf. Tokman, 1978; Dannhaeuser, 1980). In Latin American cities, despite retail structures having been altered with the rapid rise of supermarkets since the early 1990s (Reardon and Berdegué, 2002), the long-standing trade sites of markets

¹ There appears to be no consensus on a uniform term identifying these shops. They are most often generically referred to as neighbourhood stores, an imprecise moniker, or by local or place-specific names such as sari-sari stores in the Philippines, where the bulk of such research has been undertaken (cf. Dannhaeuser, 1980; Silverio, 1982; Bonnin, 2006). In the analysis that follows, we borrow the term ‘trade store’ from the literature examining what can be considered a rural relative of the urban variety, specializing in the same vein of basic daily wares (cf. Grossman, 1986; Curry, 1999). We also interchange the term with tienda, the local Bolivian name for the stores.
and neighbourhood stores continue to meet the majority of household needs of low income people (Bromley, 1998). Notwithstanding the fact that these shops are at the crux of daily nourishment for many urban poor, to date we lack a grasp of their various roles in the everyday micro-geographies of developing country cities.

Research investigating this neighbourhood trade in basic goods is exceptionally scant compared to that on other informal food venues and ventures, including marketplaces and small-scale enterprises. Previous considerations of these stores have tended to be embedded in discussions dedicated to broader informal sector topics such as home-based livelihoods or other forms of urban retail and trade.2 Only a handful of studies have explicitly examined trade stores, revealing some of their chief micro-economic features, such as their role in providing goods purchasable with lower incomes, access to credit, and contributions to trader livelihoods (cf. Tokman, 1978; Dannhaeuser, 1980; Silverio, 1982; Bonnin, 2006). While valuable, this literature does not always shed light on the diversity of other, often intangible, aspects of these stores in the daily lives of the people who rely upon them.

This paper poses the primary question: What are the social functions, values and consequences of these shops in the context of a poor urban neighbourhood in a developing country? To address this question, we undertook a systematic case study in the Frutillar neighbourhood, Cochabamba, Bolivia (Figure 1) from May to July, 2005. Sixty semi-structured interviews were carried out with neighbourhood residents including all 10 local trade store traders, in conjunction with informal interviews with residents and ongoing, intensive semi-participant observation in the shop owned by the lead author's host household and in the neighbourhood as a whole.3 Member checking was undertaken using semi-structured interviews with a range of key informants.4

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3 It should be noted that four of the traders were indigenous, being Quechua, while the others were of mixed race/ethnicity.

4 Pseudonyms are used to refer to participants. All interviewing and analysis was completed in Spanish, and all translations were completed by the lead author.
We begin by situating our study in the limited trade store literature, describing current understandings of their economic characteristics in developing countries and their potential social value. We go on to develop a conceptual framework which focuses on how common, routine features of neighbourhood environments are understood to shape local experiences of quality of life. Next, we contextualize our case study within the broader Bolivian and Cochabamba settings, followed by the presentation of our empirical findings. We conclude that by taking account of the social significance of these shops, it is possible to comprehend – far more so than previously conceived – the extent to which they are critically entwined with the everyday welfare of local people.

Conceptualizing trade stores

Making ends meet economically

The small body of trade store literature to date has mainly focused on describing their economic features (cf. Dannhaeuser, 1980 on sari-sari stores in the Philippines; Ligthelm, 2005 on spaza shops in South Africa). This research has highlighted that trade stores are especially important sources of basic goods for urban dwellers making do with few resources in developing countries. By negating extra transportation expenditures vis-à-vis their residential locations and by specializing in small quantities of goods suitable in size and price for fluctuating incomes, trade stores help people with limited budgets cover their basic daily needs. They also make perishable products available for immediate consumption to nearby families lacking refrigerators, and are convenient for those with limited mobility, such as women constrained by domestic and reproductive responsibilities (Tokman, 1978; Dannhaeuser, 1980; Silverio, 1982; Chen, 1997; Bromley, 1998; Schroeder, 2000; Ordinario, 2004; Bonnin, 2004, 2005, 2006). It is precisely the close-to-home provision of daily necessities that makes trade stores invaluable for those who utilize them (Tokman, 1978; Tipple, 2004, 2005; Ligthelm, 2005). The economic importance of trade stores is magnified by their role as sources of credit, whereby customers without the means to pay at the moment of purchase acquire goods with the expectation of future repayments. At times, preferred customers can also gain other tangible benefits such as discounts and extra portions (Dannhaeuser, 1980; Ligthelm, 2005; Bonnin, 2005, 2006). Customers may also tolerate the actual cost per item being typically marginally higher than at larger venues, as the higher cost is outweighed by the above advantages (Tokman, 1978; Dannhaeuser, 1980).

Turning from the customers to the entrepreneurial families running these shops, researchers have documented that the home-based nature of trade stores is of particular benefit to household livelihoods. Trade stores facilitate capital savings due to the concurrence of productive and consumptive household resources, such as allocating dwelling space for dual domestic and trade purposes, and ‘dipping’ into store stocks for household use when necessary. Trade stores also afford households the flexibility to strategize during periods of low profits to support their livelihoods by, for example, lengthening store operating hours (Tokman, 1978; Dannhaeuser, 1980; Silverio, 1982; Bonnin, 2004, 2005, 2006; Tipple, 2005). Trade stores are also economically significant to neighbourhoods by providing local employment (Schroeder, 2000; Tipple, 2005).

Extending trade store conceptualizations: bringing in the social

While the research cited above has pointed to a number of specific economic benefits of trade stores for both local customers and the households running them, the social importance of these enterprises has not been the specific focus of any research to date – motivating our own study here. Only a few authors have commented peripherally on this aspect without investigating it in any systematic fashion or detail. Alluded to in a few brief asides, authors such as Silverio (1982, p. 120) writing on sari-sari stores in Manila, have described such stores as “one hub of neighbourhood life, [which] enables residents to meet one another informally and develop ties of friendship and neighbourliness”. Safa (1974), Dannhaeuser (1980), Schroeder (2000), and Bonnin (2004) have also made brief observations suggestive of the roles of trade stores as spaces for local social interactions. More specifically, Silverio (1982), Schroeder (2000), and Bonnin (2004, 2006) also considered them to be the sites for information exchange and gossip, and Silverio (1982) noted that such locations might have a role for neighbourhood surveillance and intervention.

Extending trade store conceptualizations: bringing in the neighbourhood

The functioning of trade stores is built upon a series of overlapping local relationships, whereby traders and customers are simultaneously neighbours, as well as conceivably friends, relatives, or acquaintances (Tokman, 1978; Dannhaeuser, 1980; Silverio, 1982; Bonnin, 2006). Indeed, social relationships between local traders and their customers are central to the viable operation of trade stores as they govern the nature of economic exchange and serve to connect traders with their neighbourhood customer base (Dannhaeuser, 1980; Silverio, 1982). From these connections, it could be deduced that the place of residence, specifically neighbourhood, is effectively the common thread that links together traders and customers in the everyday practices of trade, yet this is a point not expressly developed in the literature to date. While previous studies refer to neighbourhood locales when setting the scene for their research or describing the physical geographical proximity of trade, they do not consider the implications of neighbourhood as a discrete context.

5 Such work, however, has been undertaken with regard to marketplace trade in developing countries in the past (see Alexander, 1987; Benediktsson, 2002; Seligmann, 2004; Little, 2004; Brown, 2006; among others), but not specifically with respect to trade stores.
Hence, such contextual considerations have not been central to the arguments put forth in earlier work.

Given the lack of neighbourhood research on trade stores, we argue that a theoretical parallel useful in framing our understanding of the neighbourhood significance of these shops can be drawn from research in developed countries, currently of intense academic interest. This literature conceptualizes neighbourhood environments as important contextual influences on human welfare. These influences, or ‘neighbourhood effects’, are understood to operate through the physical and social resources and organizational structures that neighbourhoods supply to support (or hinder) people’s daily lives (Mayer and Jencks, 1989; Tienda, 1991; Sampson, 1999; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Macintyre et al., 2002). To date, this literature has largely maintained a Eurocentric bias, focusing on features of disadvantaged local areas in English-speaking, industrialized countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Forrest et al., 2002; Forrest, 2004; Forrest and Ngai-ming, 2004). Yet, we argue that it is in developing world contexts, where urban development is most rapid, that such arguments and debates would appear to have direct relevance, helping us to comprehend in more detail the complex elements underlying and creating or reducing conditions of poverty and marginalization in such cities. Hence, our application of this approach to a Bolivian neighbourhood expands the geographic scope of a body of literature mainly limited to developed country cases. Furthermore, understanding the neighbourhood effects of trade stores – a prolific feature of low income urban neighbourhoods across a diversity of developing countries (cf. Strassmann, 1987) – can potentially facilitate the effective formulation of policies and local-level interventions targeted to improve the lives of poor communities around the developing world.

Evidence from developed countries supports the notion that neighbourhood environments play an important role in shaping the types of everyday resources upon which people are able to draw, in turn, influencing the chances they negotiate in maintaining and improving the quality of their lives. These neighbourhood effects are constituted through the interface of both the material and the social features of neighbourhoods. Local caches of neighbourhood institutions set in motion interactions among local people by spurring engagement in common activities and stimulating informal public life. Shared experiences around local facilities such as schools, health centres, or parks, for example, give form to place-based micro-social processes or aspects of the ‘collective social functioning’ of places (Tienda, 1991; Brower, 1996; Oldenburg, 1997; Macintyre et al., 2002). Studies have shown these to include increased intra-community connection and familiarity, positive feelings about places, the development of trust and tolerance, the exchange of local information, the facilitation of local social life, and the reinforcement of the habitability of place (see Forrest and Kearns, 1999; and Cattell, 2004 in the UK; Kearns, 1991; and Witten et al., 2001 in New Zealand; Baum and Palmer, 2002; and Ziersch et al., 2005 in Australia). Our study of trade stores in a Bolivian neighbourhood extends this literature, taking these arguments and key ideas on board, to examine how trade stores – as everyday neighbourhood fixtures specific to developing country residential environments – are not only economically significant but may also fulfil less explicit, yet distinct, roles in the social functioning of places.

Contextualizing tienda trade in the Frutillar neighbourhood, Cochabamba, Bolivia

Bolivia has proportionately the largest informal economy in Latin America (67.2%), a vast share of which comprises micro- or small-scale enterprises (Rhine, 2001; Schneider, 2007). According to a World Bank (2006) report, a mere 400,000 Bolivians are formally employed in the private sector, the majority thus subsisting on informal occupations. In a country of just nine million people, more than 60% live below the national poverty line (UNDP, 2007). Bolivia’s diverse indigenous peoples make up at least 50% of the total population, and are increasingly overrepresented in the poorest brackets (World Bank, 2005). Indeed, the ethnic and social demarcations of poverty in the Bolivian context are acute. Wealth and political power have historically been concentrated within the white, European-descended, Spanish-speaking elite who constitute the urban minority, resulting in what has been described as ‘two Bolivias’ (Gamarra, 2003). In recent years, the persistence of this Bolivian style of social exclusion has brought the country to a critical crossroads as citizens have organized – successfully to a certain extent – to place substantive demands on the Bolivian state for key human, social, and economic rights (see Enever, 2001; Whitehead, 2001; Gamarra, 2003; Arze and Kruse, 2004; Rivera Cusicaquini, 2004; Perreault, 2006). The Cochabamba Guerra del Agua7 in 2000 was a landmark challenge to these enduring inequalities that seemed to forecasting the subsequent period of vehement public protest from 2003 to 2005. Social unrest around further privatization of resources like water and national gas frequently forced much of the country to a literal standstill with roadblocks erected on Bolivia’s few commercially navigable roadways. The economic consequences were dire at all levels. This discontent propelled the consecutive resignations of two presidents – the second stepping down during the initial phase of fieldwork for this study in 2005 – and is a testament to the detrimental state of Bolivian liveli-
The election of indigenous candidate Evo Morales to the presidency in 2005 represents a major point of departure from these historical exclusionary trends, at least in the political realm (Singer, 2007). On the whole, these broader social, political, and economic conditions together comprise a very real ‘crisis’ backdrop to everyday life in the Frutillar neighbourhood of Cochabamba.

In many ways, the Frutillar – located in the north-eastern urban fringe of Cochabamba, a city of just over 500,000 people (INE, 2001) – is a typical Cochabamba neighbourhood. The city has historically been – and continues to be – transformed by migration and unregulated land settlement on the ever-expanding urban periphery, where active contestation over rights to space, access to essential services, and formal inclusion within municipal limits is ongoing (Goldstein, 2004). The Frutillar itself is a product of this haphazard and extra-legal pattern of urban growth. The history of the neighbourhood dates back over 30 years when the first settlers constructed dwellings upon the previously rugged, uninhabited hillside, a picture that Camila, owner of a local chichería – a traditional site for drinking chicha or corn beer – paints clearly: “I have lived here for twenty-six years. Before, it was silence, some four or five houses. We walked on footpaths, on just grass. On all sides there were spines that pricked you” (10/07/05). The earliest inhabitants began the process of urbanizing this undeveloped land: their self-made pipe system directed water from the mountains above to the neighbourhood which neighbours brought to their houses in pails; paths cleared by the community later on became streets.

Frutillar residents described how through the decades they struggled to obtain basic urban services and pressured public transit to extend coverage to their neighbour-
As is characteristic of many other Cochabamba residential scenes, in the Frutillar few features interrupt the high walls and closed gates that shield dwellings from the street. Indeed, some of the only breaks among the older adobe (mud brick) and newer brick homes are 10 neighbourhood trade stores or tiendas (see Figure 3). Typical tiendas in the Frutillar and around the city are adjacent to the street or are set back from the street by an enclosed patio. The latter may furnish a public payphone booth and, on occasion, a table and chairs when patrons may consume a beverage or snack, as illustrated in Figure 4. A window or doorway, most often gated to keep stock secure, constitutes the point of exchange. Clients seldom enter the physical area containing retail goods, but rather request items from the tienda, the tienda trader, with products and money exchanged through the window. The economic importance of trade stores, as outlined in the conceptual framework above, is instantly apparent in the Frutillar. For many people in this neighbourhood “a tienda is for surviving” (Ronald 16/06/05). Trade stores save residents the time and transit fare necessary for purchases made in la Cancha, the downtown market (up to 1 1/2 hours round-trip on the local bus and then on foot through the market), provide items on credit in instances of need, and supply goods required in moments of urgency, such as in the middle of the night. For those relatively less well-off residents whose unstable incomes preclude larger purchases from la Cancha, trade stores are the lifeblood of daily subsistence. By buffering the day-to-day economic uncertainty of local households, as well as the general instability of the country’s economic climate, detailed more below, Frutillar trade stores are effective safeguards of family economies. These critical functions ensure that residents satisfy their most vital material needs in moments of financial shortfall.

The place of trade stores in neighbourhood social dynamics

Besides their valuable economic contributions, trade stores in the Frutillar fulfil a number of equally essential de facto social functions consequential in their own right to day-to-day lived experiences in the Frutillar. Indeed, the traditional commercial purposes of tiendas are seemingly superseded by certain extra-curricular roles. Analyzed in turn below, these include functioning as quasi-public spaces, supporting local information exchange, facilitating informal social control, supplying social-emotional support, lending a helping hand via special favours, and securing access to necessities in critical moments of the Bolivian crisis.

Quasi-public spaces

Tiendas are fundamental features of everyday routines in the Frutillar, and for most like Gerardo (18/07/05), a taxi driver, this is where the day begins: “In the morning I get up and the first thing I do is buy bread at the tienda”. As points of common necessity, trade stores are effectively quasi-public spaces which “at least allow for people to go out and do something outside their house” (Tiendera Isabel 12/07/05). The passage of residents through neighbourhood streets en route to tiendas and their casual convergence in the shop locations stimulates an active, public dimension of the neighbourhood. Naya (08/06/05), a young mother and nurse, echoed the neighbourhood sentiment that “without tiendas perhaps the neighbourhood would be empty. Through the tiendas there is movement of the people. This is important because thanks to the tiendas they go out and shop, and if not, they would be stuck inside their houses”. These outlets are especially important for women, many of whom spend their days within a close radius of home as a result of their domestic responsibilities.

A few other facilities diversify the Frutillar landscape, yet lack sufficient community appeal to fruitfully support neighbourhood public life. The local sports field and park are considered to be “for kids. That’s it” (Victoria, 23-year-old married mother of two, 15/07/05), and some residents believe them to be dangerous spaces after dark. The few chicherías are often negatively viewed as “places that bring bad habits” (Boris, operator of a home-based metal workshop, 10/06/05). Local churches also fail to offset the private environment since “different people go to different churches and so religion divides a bit the collective experience of the neighbourhood” (Jaime, accountant, 17/07/05), and organized neighbourhood festivals and celebrations are few and far between. As such, daily life in the Frutillar mainly takes place in the domestic sphere, and when this intersects with the neighbourhood, it is for the most part, in the very spaces created by tiendas.

‘Local loudspeakers’

As one tienda customer explained, these trade stores are “a species of warehouse of information at the neighbourhood level” (Miguel, recent university graduate, 15/07/05), acting as catalysts of neighbourhood communication networks. Due to their currency in daily life, trade stores create opportunities for regular contact among neighbours in these shared physical spaces. Local information exchange is activated and sustained not only by this informal contact, but also by the direct capacity of tienda traders to broadcast knowledge from their well-informed positions, or act as “local loudspeakers” (Jaime 17/07/05). Indeed, many residents agree that the role of tiendas in the neighbourhood is “to connect a bit of news from one neighbour to another” (Monica, school teacher, 16/06/05).

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10 Census data at the neighbourhood level are not produced by The National Statistics Institute of Bolivia (INE). Rather, data are collected at the scale of the zone, which is a larger geo-statistical unit made up of multiple neighbourhoods. For more information, see INE (2001).

11 Of the 10 trade stores in the neighbourhood, all but one were run almost entirely by women with the occasional addition of family help. The exception to this was a retired elderly gentleman in his 70s who baked bread to sell in his family’s shop, and frequently worked in conjunction with his wife. Most of the tienderas were grandmothers, and had lived in the neighbourhood from anywhere between 15 to 30 years.
*Tiendas* are host to a range of types of information valuable to both the collective good of the neighbourhood and the interests of individuals. First, *tienda*-sourced information keeps local people connected to current neighbourhood affairs of mutual importance. Carmen (14/06/05), a 25-year-old nurse, explained that “I resort to the *tienda*, all the neighbours resort to the *tienda*...Generally we chat about the neighbourhood. We chat about the delinquents, the neighbourhood improvements, what’s happening with the person up the hill”. Likewise, in *Tiendera* Cintía’s (20/06/05) shop, she is aware that customers “come to buy and they tell...They converse among themselves about something that has happened in the neighbourhood, a fight, a robber that got in. Always telling little things”. As nodes for neighbourly dialogue, *tiendas* facilitate the circulation of information regarding local security, urban services and infrastructure, and the ‘goings-on’ of Frutillar families, effectively linking together local individuals with their neighbourhood, and helping to maintain a certain continuity and degree of neighbourhood-wide communication. Second, and more specifically, *tienderas* interconnect local economic opportunities, as Hugo and Inés (28/06/05), an elderly couple new to the neighbourhood, came to understand. They note that in a *tienda* “you can find out where

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**Figure 3** Map of the Frutillar indicating *tienda* locations.

(Source: Adapted from Servicio Municipal de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado de Cochabamba (SEMAPA) 2003. *Ampliación red de agua potable proyecto: OTB El Frutillar*. Amplified from original scale: 1:1,000.)
to find an apartment, a seamstress... If someone needs some work, or is in need of a bricklayer, you can ask there. Workers themselves go [to the tienda] and say that they need work. And they say [to the tiendera] what they do and where they live”. By diffusing details of the trade specialties of other residents or commercial prospects such as homes for sale or rent, tienderas are effective liaisons for neighbourhood economic transactions and employment opportunities. Third, and unsurprisingly, tienderas are also sources of practical information such as home addresses and local directions. Andrés (30/06/05) described how people come to his tienda in order to “look for a person that lives in the neighbourhood. They ask me if I know such a man or such a woman and where they live. And if they live here, I indicate where to find them”.

As a consequence of the familiarity of tienda traders with the local neighbourhood, tiendas are points of reference or live ‘local directories’. In the context of an otherwise fragmented and sparse public scene, this informative aspect of trade stores is critical since, if not ascertained in a local trade store, “the tiendera is watching the street, seeing what happens” (Monica 16/06/05). Thus, as nuclei of neighbourhood activity, tiendas add further to the active street life and create an oblique form of vigilance, enhancing perceptions of local safety.

Indeed, tienderas are uniquely situated to comprehend and identify phenomena that fall outside regular neighbourhood patterns, and effectively transmit warnings. Diana (20/05/05), a 28-year-old school teacher, described how her nearest tienda has played a vital safety role for her household:

Since the tienderas are always in the neighbourhood they know all the people and robbers don’t enter. For example, when the tienda across the street closed, robbers broke into our house. In general the tienderas keep vigil a bit and support the neighbourhood and they are informants of danger. I don’t know everyone from the neighbourhood, but the tienderas, yes, they know everyone.

The capacity of tienderas to rapidly forewarn the neighbours of threats through tienda informative circuits was found to be critical to the maintenance of local social order. Alejandra (17/06/05), the neighbourhood hairdresser, explained that “at times [the tienderas] warn us that it is necessary to take care, that there are strangers around or outsider cars”. These informal announcements importantly compel collective defensive actions against violations of neighbourhood security as Ivan and Silva (12/06/05), a young couple renting accommodation in the Frutillar, recalled: “Up the hill they assaulted a house.

Figure 4 A tiendera standing in the enclosed portion of her tienda with a payphone booth and space to consume food and beverage, the Frutillar.
A single person noticed and went to the tienda and then all the people went to the house so the robber wouldn’t escape”. Thus, by indirectly monitoring daily activities from their pivotal positions and calling attention in decisive moments of threat, tienderas act as informal ‘watchdogs’ or caretakers regarding community behaviour.

Some Frutillar tienderas also assume positions as operative local authorities, directly interceding on their own recognition in objectionable situations. This responsibility for informal policing is undertaken by a number of tienderas, and constitutes a valid form of recourse in the eyes of local people, as Tiendera Barbárá (07/07/05), one of the longest-standing tienderas in the neighbourhood, remarked:

> Intervention, of course, for that we are here. In a fight, of course, you speak to them since you know them...One time I was coming up the hill and a couple was fighting. ‘Calm down. Go.’ I told them. ‘Excuse us, Doña Barbárá’, they told me. I correct them and they thank me.

Similarly, Ana (12/07/05), an elderly tiendera, declared that “of course, I would defend. Nor would I let anyone hit anyone. One goes out in defense”. Attesting to the legitimacy and effectiveness of tienderas as neighbourhood authority figures, Tiendera Beatríz – whose tienda is one of the neighbourhood’s first – is at times sought out by her clients as an arbiter of conjugal conflicts and family disputes:

> When Doña Patricia or Doña Carlita have problems with their husbands they call me and I go, I intervene...At times, when I go [one of the men] can say, ‘why do you get involved? I can kill my wife’...The children come and say that he’s hitting their mom, so you go...They ask you for back-up (05/07/05).

Tienderas can therefore play an integral role in sustaining intra-neighbourhood harmony in the public sphere of the community. In certain extreme cases, they even promote intra-household sanctity resulting in the physical protection of local women and children, and facilitate the internal functioning of Frutillar families.12

Overall, tienderas comprise critical bolts in the structures of neighbourhood micro-level social processes sustaining safety, conviviality, and shared value systems. Local problem-solving practices incorporate and validate tienderas in this role. These supplemental services provided by tienderas guard against some of the aggressiveness internal to both the local households and the local area. Credence is given to this informal organization in a place with virtually no police or other formal authority figures present. In fact, residents rarely considered calling the police as a viable option when discussing the resolution of neighbourhood or family security, often citing the neighbourhood’s capacity to deal with such matters internally.13

Social-emotional support

Frutillar tienderas are sources of local social support and “help morally, not just economically” (Ivan 12/06/05). When residents have established a level of trust with tien-deras, they often seek emotional aid in tiendas for the express purpose of discussing their private problems in an almost therapeutic interaction. This support offsets deficits in their family and other support networks on several levels, and takes place in a neighbourhood setting that provides no formal social services.14 By supplying a listening ear and proffering personal advice, tienderas provide valuable emotional outlets for locals such as Sara (27/06/2005), a clothes trader, who echoed the sentiments of many: “The tiendera always give you a little space, even if she’s with other clients or is a bit busy...We’ve had two deaths in the family. She’s always listening to us...She says to you ‘what a pity’...The people are always telling her things that happen to them. She tells them it’s necessary to have patience”. In certain cases, tienderas act as critical family surrogates, as made clear by Anita (30/05/05), a struggling single mother working nightshifts as a security guard: “Doña Beatríz is like a mother. I always call her mamita. She understands you a lot...I am preparing a document so that Doña Beatriz cares for my children if something happens to me...The tienderas are a support for everyone. They are always there”. Tienderas are also acutely aware of their role in counterbalancing local family dysfunction, as Tiendera Dolores (24/06/05) acknowledged: “At times they want to vent themselves with someone and they cannot do it with their family. They want me to advise them”. As such, tienderas provide a proximate moral crutch in the local neighbourhood, consciously filling a substantial socio-emotional void in the lives of neighbours and compensating for shortcomings in family support. In affording this service, tienderas are agents of social goods as well as traders in daily consumption wares, dealing in both daily food products and peace of mind.

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12 Tiendera Beatriz takes her role as a neighbourhood steward a step further than most by also asserting herself in the positive socialization of her tienda: “To the young women in the tienda I say, ‘so fast you’re looking for a boy. Why don’t you think about your studies’...I can’t prohibit them [from doing certain things] because they’re not my children. The only thing I can do is give them advice, nothing else, some healthy advice” (05/07/05). Beatriz is endorsed in this role when local parents turn to her as a means of communication between themselves and their children: “At times the clients say to me, ‘talk to my daughter...please, ask where she has gone last night. She arrived home very late’...And when she comes to the tienda I say to her, ‘why do you go out so late? There is so much danger. What is going to become of your parents?’” (Beatriz 05/07/05).

13 Interestingly, precisely while this fieldwork was undertaken, the neighbourhood was launching a neighbourhood security guard program as part of a federal initiative to simultaneously formalize local security and create local jobs. Many residents were initially unhappy and sceptical of the project, expressing concern about the cost – including disparities in contributions made by residents – and the specific hours and locations of the patrols. Thus, support across the neighbourhood was uneven.

14 Even if such services existed, it is unlikely that local residents would be able to afford such care.

15 Mamita is an endearing term that literally means ‘little mother’.

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A helping hand

In addition to this emotional support, some tienderas are also quick to identify clients in material need, and may offer goods with no expectation of repayment. For residents on the receiving end of these rather generous acts, they are highly valued, like for Mariana, a time-keeper for a local bus line, who appreciated that “the tiendra where we go has a lot of stock. Besides that, she gives us things, some things to my mom. ‘Take this with you’, she says. In other parts I don’t think they do that” (14/07/05). Similarly, in Tienda Beatriz’s shop, she passes on clothes outgrown by her children to some of her neediest clients. Certainly, these gifts help maintain a loyal customer base; however, they simultaneously benefit the most disadvantaged local people and expand the scope of social support extended by trade stores for certain customers.

Traders also provide favours resembling neighbours’ goodwill deeds which help to ease the execution of daily routine activities for local people. These actions involve a variety of informal contracts such as holding keys, delivering messages, watching a house, or exchanging household goods, such as water. Diana, the young school teacher, valued being able to “leave the tienderas in charge to deliver messages to our family members, or to hand them the keys if I don’t arrive” (29/05/05). Such agreements endow local people with a form of neighbourhood insurance that they can fall back upon to lessen the burden of mundane household undertakings. While such cooperative relationships are not universal to all trade stores and all residents, they comprise reliable contingency strategies for those who draw upon them, thus assisting in the balance of everyday loads.

Transcending the immediate

Moving beyond immediate daily activities, trade stores play an important part in informing and constructing local experiences of the Bolivian national crisis by supplying everyday essentials during periods of social upheaval. Ivan and Silvia appreciated that “during periods of crisis, when there are blockades and everything, and you can’t move through the city, the tiendas help us by providing because there is no where to go” (12/06/05). Roger, husband of Tienda Beatriz, concurred that tiendas are crucial to fulfilling daily needs in the midst of political and social calamity: “When there are blockades in the streets and you can’t get to supply centres it makes things easier to have a tienda in the neighbourhood. In the Guerra del Agua no one left their houses. It was a time of social crisis… The tienda helps so that you don’t have to go. It is the tienda that runs the risk of the blockades in order to bring goods” (24/07/05). In these circumstances, beyond the time, financial, and labour investments that tienderas take on, they also gamble personal losses or harm transiting the city in these tumultuous times. Trade stores essentially shield the neighbourhood population from the civil unrest downtown, thus supporting a protective, safe haven, neighbourhood context.

Discussion and conclusions: “Without tiendas it’s a dead neighbourhood”

In sum, our analysis has shown that by fostering key features of local social life, tiendas in the Frutillar are critically embedded in the community dynamics at work within the neighbourhood milieu, and, as a result, are intertwined with the everyday welfare of those who live there. As quasi-public spaces in an otherwise highly private neighbourhood setting, trade stores are instrumental in facilitating the local informal public life. These shops are unique channels for neighbourhood communication, providing an operative line of transmission linking local people together around issues of personal and collective consequence. Related to these informational networks, Frutillar tiendas form the foundations of informal social control, underpinning and preserving local normative standards. Tiendas are also sources of two forms of vital support, social–emotional and special practical favours, which counterbalance deficits in family relationships and relieve day-to-day difficulties. Finally, we see how, in the Frutillar, tiendas are a portal through which the wider constraints of the Bolivian crisis are felt and understood at the neighbourhood level. Overall, as the cornerstone of Frutillar informal public life, trade stores comprise physical spaces which enable collective social experiences to transpire. In this linking role, tienderas act as ‘bridges’ interconnecting otherwise disparate groups of local people within the neighbourhood (Granovetter, 1973; Henn ing and Lieberg, 1996). The significance of the cumulative effect of these weak ties, or informal and casual acquaintanceships of varying degrees, is clear in terms of the substantial benefits such social connections yield both for the individuals and for the neighbourhood as a whole. Indeed, we argue that without tiendas, certain aspects of neighbourhood collective social functioning in the Frutillar would be severely disabled, or even nonexistent.

Tiendas in the Frutillar are centrally bound up in local perceptions of what makes a ‘good’ neighbourhood. Frequently, residents reported that tiendas are an essential ingredient of a habitable place to the degree that “a neighbourhood without tiendas is as if my breakfast was missing sugar” (Miguel 15/07/05). Similarly, for local met alworker Boris, “tiendas are like sites for a rest. Where there aren’t any tiendas it is like seeing oneself in a desert. There is no water. There is nothing. A place where there are no tiendas is a desert place” (10/06/05). Tiendas are central to local understandings of what constitutes a desirable place in which to live and literally make the neighbourhood ‘alive’ to residents, revealing the meaningfulness and relevance of this context to their daily lives.

Reflecting back on our conceptual framework, we note that in developed country settings, neighbourhood-based social resources have been shown to buffer some of the negative consequences associated with living in poor places and to contribute to more supportive local contexts (Cattell, 2001; Klinenberg, 2002; Sampson et al., 2002). Neighbourhoods can thus be sites for the realization of collectively beneficial resources, such as a sense of secu-
ity or mutually supportive norms and values; whereas ac-

cess to other personal resources, such as close friendships,

be more geographically diffuse (Sampson, 1999,

2003). These functions highlight the ‘public goods’ aspects

of neighbourhood social resources whereby residents do

not necessarily have to maintain strong neighbourhood

social connections individually in order to benefit from

collective qualities such as safety or informal social con-

control (Lochner et al., 1999; Sampson, 1999). This literature

suggests that there is often a latent stock of social goods

locked in neighbourhood environments; goods that hold

the potential to improve the chances individuals have at

bettering their lives (Sampson et al., 2002). It is apparent

in this instance that tiendas, in a similar fashion to public

facilities in urban neighbourhoods of developed countries –

be it a school, a park, or a health centre – operate be-

yond their intended or conventional retail function. They

similarly contribute to the broader social fabric of the lo-

cal neighbourhood in ways highly consequential to the

quality of life of residents (cf. Tienda, 1991; Oldenburg,

1997; Witten et al., 2001).

In contrast, earlier trade store literature, albeit limited,

had shown that trade stores fulfil a number of vital eco-

nomic functions across a range of locations in developing
country cities. Here, we have tapped into how trade

stores in developing countries are interwoven with the

social contours of local places, and thus have added a

valuable new layer to the extant economic work. The

transfer of concepts from the developed country neigh-

bourhood literature to our examination of developing

country trade stores has enabled us to comprehend the

ways in which trade stores play a daily part in how local

people negotiate their chances for life improvement. As

such, our study simultaneously addresses a geographic

gap in neighbourhood effects research and, we suggest,

that it is a constructive framework for taking on ques-
tions of urban disparities at the neighbourhood level in

the global south.

An advantage of the approach we have taken here is

that it can work to effectively inform the making of rele-

vant policies for urban development and design regarding

the installation of neighbourhood social services and local

public facilities, as well as programs for eliminating unde-

sirable characteristics, such as crime, from these places.

For example, how can a municipal policy effectively en-
hance neighbourhood safety without first understanding

the informal mechanisms already firmly entrenched? Or,

how can an initiative to generate local employment reach

its full potential without due consideration of the informal

means through which economic information is locally re-

layed? Comprehending these factors is ultimately key to

the success of any interventions aimed at improving the

quality of poor urban neighbourhoods.

In conclusion, by focusing on the complexities of the

neighbourhood roles fulfilled by trade stores via a qualita-
tive case study of a specific urban place, we have shown that

in the Frutillar tiendas nourish the daily needs from

the most fundamental corporeal necessities to broader

shared stakes at the heart of community interests. By

cushioning certain internal household deficits and under-

pinning the processes supporting collective neighbour-

hood life, tiendas uphold the wellbeing of individuals

and enhance the liveability of the Frutillar neighbour-

hood. One of our key informants, Jaime (17/07/05), made

this point abundantly clear when he stated:

The tiendas fulfil several roles. They are loudspeakers of

information. Also they are those places that sell you articles

of much urgency that you need in the house. They are

places that, in some cases, serve to bring together two or

more people to have improvised conversations. These are

dialogues on themes about the neighbourhood, and since

we don't have cafes or other places, they serve this role.

They are communicators. They alert you to problems, of

some things that occur... They fulfil many roles that maybe

we don't appreciate so often, if we don't think about it.

These shops stand out in the urban landscape of infor-

mal trade due to the expressly neighbourhood level geo-

graphy at which they operate; a scalar specificity for which

they are arguably unique. By envisaging these informal re-
tail shops – as we have here – to be built in spaces for real-

izing collective practices and for fulfilling shared needs on

a daily basis, it is possible to appreciate the more complex

niche that trade stores occupy in the micro-geographies of

urban places.

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