

Chapter 5

The Racial Dimensions of Social Capital: Toward a New Understanding of Youth Empowerment and Community Organizing in America's Urban Core

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Introduction

I'm standing on a corner in West Oakland. One of my students is telling me the story of a 16-year old boy that was shot and murdered one block from her house. The week before another young black man was killed in the house behind her back yard. Raymond glides over on his bicycle. Raymond is a thirty something year old African-American male. Long and sturdy, he stands six-foot-two with dreadlocks covered in cowrie shells. Raymond is also what Elijah Anderson (1989) refers to as an old head—a person who believes it is his job to “teach, support, encourage, and in effect, socialize young men to meet their responsibilities with regard to the work ethic, family life, the law, and decency.”¹

In *Streetwise* (1990) Anderson argues, “as economic and social circumstances of the urban ghetto have changed, the traditional old head has been losing prestige and credibility as a role model.”² This is due to an intergenerational gap between “old heads” and “new old heads.” Old heads, as the name implies, are from the civil rights generation. They are people who embody the values of the civil rights movement: “decency,” “willingness to sacrifice for their children,” and a fundamental belief that “hard work pays off,” learned from their experiences during the manufacturing era.

However, “as meaningful employment has become increasingly scarce, drugs more accessible, and crime a way of life for many young black men,”³ new old heads have begun to emerge. The new old head, according to Anderson is, “younger and may be the product of a street gang making money fast and scorning the law and traditional values.”⁴ Anderson’s view of urban social change as a movement from the “old head of the formal economy to the new head of the underground economy” while powerful, overlooks the question of what other kinds of mentoring relationships are happening in urban communities in the midst of racial and spatial transformation.⁵

Raymond is not a gang banger or a drug dealer. Yet his occupation as a hustler—a person who defies traditional social norms by sometimes

working outside of the formal economy, often without the privilege of possessing mainstream educational credentials—places him squarely on the bottom of the new urban economy.⁶ Without health care and with little education his presence reminds us that the new old head, more than anything else, is the product of a racialized and highly segregated urban housing and educational system designed to increase low wage labor and feed the growing prison industrial complex.

Yet Raymond cares about young Black men. The lessons he imparts—at Raider games, on fishing expeditions, on camping trips—are of local legend. Raymond’s influence is rooted in caring not intimidation. Raymond cares enough about black children and youth to give respect and demand that he be respected. Raymond cares enough to avoid senseless violence and instill a sense of discipline and self-worth in young black men because “it’s the right thing to do.” By working outside the formal economy and providing a level of social support and personal encouragement not found in many urban educational institutions, it is possible that Raymond effects the lives of young black men more than he might if he took a job as a local school teacher in an apartheid like system designed to reproduce social inequality and racial hierarchy.

Raymond’s “hood habitus” (use of black English and slang, Hip Hop style of dress, knowledge of local history, “streetwiseness,” and commitment

to mentor some of the most downtrodden segments of a heterogeneous black community) contributes to his ability to mentor “at risk youth” marginalized by mainstream American institutions.⁷ Raymond’s commitment to teach black youth how to critically resist and navigate a highly visible racial hierarchy suggest that there are alternative models to the old head-new head, decent-street binary presented by Anderson; and that perhaps there is a dynamic, multidirectional, contradictory social praxis happening on the ground level that heretofore has been undertheorized--because the truth of the matter is that most of the action takes place somewhere in-between.

With this in mind, this essay seeks to illuminate the racial dimensions of social capital. More specifically, I examine how racially explicit experiences and practices are not explicitly conceptualized as racial by the leading theorist of social capital (Pierre 2006). Instead, racially explicit practices are coded as cultural or social with little or no attention to structural inequalities (Pierre 2004). By using cultural rather than structure as an explanation of the subordinate position of blacks, social capital theory tends to reduce the African American experience to a set of stereotypes reminiscent of the culture of poverty thesis (Pierre 2004).

This chapter offers a framework for understanding this form of cultural racism by asking two central questions: First how do seemingly non-racial theories like social capital simultaneously mark Black and Brown

youth as “highly visible” (in terms of race and class) while at the same time rendering our unique forms of social and cultural capital as pathological at best and invisible at worst; Second, how do social scientist like Anderson and Putnam divorce processes of social and cultural capital from processes of racialization and institutionalized racism.

Social capital theory, in its current academic deployment, recodes structural notions of racial inequality as primarily cultural, social, and human capital processes and interactions. Such a “post racial” reformulation, where issues of race, race relations, and racial discrimination operate just beneath the surface, are problematic for at least two reasons: First, recoding allows racialized social practices and public policy to remain unmarked, invisible, and unnamed, effectively placing the burden of social change on communities of color, while masking social capital theory as race neutral, which continues to perpetuate white privilege; Second, recoding fails to illuminate the ways in which race, space, place, gender, and sexual orientation, influences both the accumulation of social capital and its efficacy as a mobility resource.

These questions are central to the emerging field of youth development because they reflect tensions between how we theorize social capital and urban youth and what young people are actually experiencing on the ground level. While time and space considerations do not permit a

thorough review of the enormous literature on social capital, I begin by briefly reviewing its origins and applications. In particular, I pay careful attention to how the term's uses and meanings have changed over time in relation to community youth development theory and practice. Surprisingly, the concept of social capital is used widely in this emerging field (especially in the form of civic engagement); however, the field as a whole lacks definitional clarity with respect to the racial dimensions of social capital, how social capital is measured, and when social capital began to theoretically develop.

The Theoretical Origins of Social Capital

“How are social capital and social justice related?” (Seagert, Thompson, and Warren, 2001:XV). Ironically, western scholarship traces the introduction of social capital, as a theoretical concept, to the work of L. Judson Hanifan, a young progressive educator and social reformer who worked on overcoming poverty in rural Appalachia nearly a century ago (Seagert, Thompson, and Warren, 2001). According to Hanifan, “the individual is helpless socially, if left to himself” (1916, 130). Hanifan continues, “If he comes into contact with his neighbor, and they with other neighbors, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality

sufficient to the substantial improvement of living conditions in the whole community.”

In the years since Hanifan introduced the concept of social capital, a deluge of scholarship has emerged seeking to operationalize the term and contextualize its meaning. Surprisingly, however, much of this scholarship does not examine the ways in which race is implicated in structuring everyday life and the politics of identity in low-income communities. For example, the notion of social capital developed in France, by Pierre Bourdieu, offers no specific articulated notion of racial justice, and does not name the racial hierarchy that informs local realities (i.e., in 2005 there is only one black senator and there has never been a black president, thus, even for upwardly mobile blacks there is a glass ceiling, let alone for the black poor who are more structurally vulnerable). Instead, Bourdieu's understanding of social capital is part of a broader theory of capital that characterizes class positionality, as absent from, and unconnected to, racial privilege. According to Bourdieu social capital is “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248).

Bourdieu's definition is important because it highlights two key processes that are overlooked in contemporary discussions of social capital and youth

development. First, he makes explicit the importance of institutionalized power in relation to helping individuals or groups achieve social mobility. Second, he emphasized social capital's connection with processes of social inclusion and exclusion.¹

For Bourdieu, microprocesses of inclusion and exclusion are some of the most invisible, pervasive, and effective forms of marking social and cultural distance, leveraging privilege, and creating and maintaining unequal access to institutional resources (especially when combined with other forms of capital). By themselves, inclusive social networks can lead directly to economic resources (well-paying jobs, subsidized loans, and cheaper goods and services). Conversely, social exclusion (or lack of social capital in the form of social networks) can lead to social isolation, decreased opportunities, and more expensive goods and services (Bourdieu, 1985).

Over the years, Bourdieu's conception of social capital has been criticized for failing to incorporate an explicit understanding of the dialectics of race into his theory of power, and for largely concentrating on white middle-class cultural competencies, norms, networks, and styles while underemphasizing the cultural competencies, norms, networks, and styles of individuals and groups from different racial and socioeconomic locations.² In its totality, Bourdieu's framework is far more complex than what can be stated here, yet his conceptualization of power (i.e., norms, networks, and the negotiation of

public and private space) as non-racial, ignores a complicated set of historical realities that serve to reify and reinforce the existing racial hierarchy.

In an effort to understand how race, racial difference, and racial privilege occurs within the broader dimensions of historical and contemporary European domination, economist Loury was the first to develop, extend, and racialize the notion of social capital in the United States. Loury's work emerged in the context of his larger critique of neoclassical theories of race and income inequality (DeFilippis, 2001; Portes, 1998). Loury argued that traditional economic theories relied too heavily on Adam Smith's (1993) conceptualization of individualism, whereby an individual's chance to succeed or fail depended solely on his innate ability. Loury's work invoked both the literature on the intergenerational transmission of income inequality as well as an analysis of private wealth to illustrate the role of race in social mobility. According to Loury,

The merit notion that, in a free society, each individual will rise to the level justified by his or her competence conflicts with the observation that no one travels that road entirely alone... social origin has an obvious and important effect on the amount of resources that is ultimately invested. . . It may thus be useful to employ a concept of "social capital" to represent the consequences of social position in facilitating acquisition of the standard human capital characteristics. (1977, p. 176)

Loury's work is important when analyzing the ways in which urban youth, like Raymond, resist and respond to urban decay and economic

deprivation, for at least two reasons. First, Loury takes seriously the racial dimensions of social capital by arguing that racial subordination is one the most important sociological and economic variables to explain African Americans' current and past social standing. Second, Loury situates the actions of individuals in the context of their local conditions. In other words, he conceptualizes the behaviors of urban youth within the political economy of urban communities while taking into consideration the historic racialization of federal, state, and local policies aimed at limiting the democratic participation of urban youth (Ginwright & Cammarota, this volume; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995).³ For Loury, “no one goes to school in isolation from the context in which that school is located, administered, or funded” (DeFilippis 2001, p. 783).⁴ Loury's racially based critique provides an important alternative to the narrowly individualistic and myopic understanding of the culture of poverty discourse that has managed to reinvent itself, what Gomez refers to as the “nine lives of the culture of poverty,” and dominate much of today's social commentary on urban communities (Gomez, 2004).

Race, Poverty, and Social Capital in Urban Communities

All social discourses, particularly those about black people and poverty, are engaged, according to Pierre (2006), in the “ideological struggle to define identity and construct community” (4). In asking how mentorship in urban

communities is related to the development of social capital in the “hood,” it is important to reflect on the poor black men and woman who live in West Oakland struggling to define and construct community.

With this in mind, on Tuesday Narobi and I are standing in front of an abandoned house used for illegal dumping when Narobi, a fifty-six year old black parent, begins to read the neighborhood for me. According to Goffman (1959) reading involves paying close attention to a variety of symbols that people display, then using those symbols to interpret and define a social situation. In reading the neighborhood Narobi begins to construct a community identity for me: a we who fought to get diesel emissions out of the air, a we who mortgaged and lost our homes to buy this church...a we who sees illegal dumping not just as another eyesore but as a threat to the built environment. He says:

“You see that vacant lot over there...it used to be a church...a place of worship for Godsakes...and now look at it...(the narrow lot is littered with trash...a toilet boil... beer cans...needles...and rusted out auto parts...)

”Now look at it...it’s a Goddamn dump...with a toilet boil in the middle...isn’t that fitting...Have you ever been to Africa or a third -world country?”

AA: “Yea...”

N: “And when you were there didn’t it make you sick to see all the trash in the streets ...kids playin’ in filth...that’s what it’s like livin’ in this neighborhood ...It’s filthy...you know what I’m sayin’ ...I mean here in West Oakland we don’t live by the NIMBY principle...Nawh...we’re forced to live by the PIBBY principle....

AA: What’s the PIBBY principle?

N: (He laughs) “The PIBBY principle stands for Put in Blacks Back Yard...Get it...white people say NIMBY out of one side of their mouth...but out of the other they say PIBBY...So whenever you hear of NIMBY think of PIBBY too...cause there’s two sides to every coin...”

Narobi’s PIBBY principle doesn’t just name a local problem. The potency of garbage as a symbol of disorder and a threat to black communities is nothing new. In fact, there is growing empirical evidence that indicates that toxic-waste dumps, municipal landfills, garbage incinerators, and similar toxic facilities are not randomly scattered across the American landscape—rather there is a strong association between race and the location of hazardous-waste facilities (Bullard 1990). According to a 1995 study by the National Law Journal:

There is a racial divide in the way the U.S. government cleans up toxic waste sites and punishes polluters. White communities see faster action, better results and stiffer penalties than communities where blacks, Latinos, and other minorities live. This unequal protection often occurs whether the community is wealthy or poor.

Narobi doesn't need government statistics to illuminate his lived experience. He has two asthmatic children from the air-borne toxins circulating in his neighborhood. In his own words, "there's not a day that goes by that I don't think about the toxic waste in this community."

For over a year I followed Narobi and other members of the Coalition for West Oakland (CWO), a neighborhood organization dedicated to improving living conditions for Oakland's poorest community. During this time I have witnessed this volunteer organization grow into one the strongest community based organizations in West Oakland.

Closer examination of CWO activities demonstrate that in addition to serving as a community watch dog and information agency they organized a number of public service activities to increase the social capital supplied to the community:

- Rehabilitating and cleaning up dysfunctional or abandoned housing stock;
- Having bi-annual Clean air festivals and monthly neighborhood clean ups
- Monitor and tracking Diesel emissions in West Oakland

The presence of the CWO as a form of informal social control to protect segments of the black community illustrates how racial context and poverty level are important factors when measuring levels of social capital

(as civic engagement) in low-income communities. According to Portney and Berry (1997) “the participation rates of low socioeconomic status (SES) residents in predominantly African American neighborhoods is almost twice that of low SES residents of low minority population neighborhoods” (p. 637). Similarly, Assensoh (2002), focusing on race, poverty, and neighborhood composition, finds that civic engagement (in the form of community meeting attendance) is higher in high-poverty, low-income areas. These findings indicate that “residence in concentrated poverty neighborhoods can facilitate social capital and civic engagement by spurring citizens to seek political redress for existent inequalities” (Assensoh, 2002, p. 887), even though those living in black urban communities must negotiate a set of local relationships “dominated by white capital and white lending institutions...(and) by the cultural products of the white West” (Mills, 1998:102).

These racialized relationships, I argue, echoing Walter Rodney and Manning Marble, seek to underdeveloped social capital in black urban communities. However, far from under-developing social capital in urban communities, young, old, and poor black community members are “creating new political and social formations that are invisible to social scientists looking for social capital in all the old places (national data sets) and in all the traditional forms” (Cohen, 2001:270; Sullivan, 1997).

In other words, rather than social capital declining in low-income communities, as authors such as Putnam (1993a, 1995, 2000) argue, these findings point toward the development of a new model of social capital that takes into account issues of race, political power, and structural inequality. Such a framework will include a variety of context-dependent variables missing from most current models of social capital, such as racial and economic inequality, poverty rates, homeownership, unemployment, underemployment, types of employment, segregation indices, youth participation, number of community-based organizations, and some measure of community history, to name a few (Bedolla and Scola, 2004, p. 14). By developing more racially and cultural nuanced measures of social capital, we not only deepen our understanding of the various forms of social capital at work in low-income communities, but also ensure that we do not dilute the concept to such an extent that it is rendered meaningless (Portes, 1998).

Race, Youth, and Civil Society

One way to more precisely conceptualize social capital and civic engagement in urban communities is through community activism among youth. Cohen (2001) argues that Putnam and others overlooked community-based struggles largely because they focused their analysis on national databases of political participation and did not spend any time, in the

“hood,” with urban youth. For those of us who do spend time with urban youth, we know that young people in urban communities rarely have the power to make decisions about policies that shape their lives, yet activism remains an important form of social capital in the urban milieu.

Saegert, Thompson and Warren (2001) acknowledge the challenges associated with conceptualizing social capital in the context of poor communities. **Their edited volume is important because it discuss how urban youth, constrained and restrained by racial subordination and white privilege in most social spaces, come to understand different articulations of social capital, and how social capital evolves, changes and hybridizes across time, space, and place, as well as how it is connected to different racial projects—of labor, education, the media, the police, etc.** Yet, eventhough Saegert, Thompson and Warren (2001) do not declare, as Putnam does, that social capital is declining in urban communities, they do avoid an analysis of how race itself shapes organizing strategies, group solidarity, collective action, and grassroots mobilization in poor communities. The ethnographic vignettes of Raymond and Nairobi, as well as “thick descriptions” such as Gregory’s ethnography of the Lefrak community in Queens New York, serve as important counternarratives that remind us of the continuing significance of race in relation to social capital, precisely because they highlight how disputes over racial meanings can

foster political networks, engage residents in civic affairs, and spark activism in communities among youth and adults.

As it stands now many of the leading theories of social capital are silent on the issue of race, ignoring the fact that young people in poor communities contribute to rich social networks (i.e., membership in voluntary associations, trust in **local** authorities, cooperation for mutual benefit). These networks often exist as a way for youth to learn how to resist and cope with persistent racial marginalization. These are significant omissions, and limiting factors in the potential uses of social capital frameworks in community youth development theory and practice because Americans in general, and youth in particular, “define their core political identities in terms of their race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and culture” (Smith 1997, p. 4; DeFilippis, 2001, p. 791).

Thus, the important question is not has social capital in the form of civic engagement declined for urban youth, but rather what conditions promote or inhibit different articulations of social capital and why? And what role does race, age, gender, and sexual orientation, play in the development or underdevelopment of social capital in poor black communities and other communities of color (Ginwright 2006).

Work by Aguilar–San Juan; Duncan-Andrade; Flores-González, Rodríguez, and Rodríguez-Muñiz; Kwon; HoSang; and others (all in this

volume) demonstrates that urban communities are rich sites of social capital and civic engagement, particularly among youth of color. This body of work highlights a disjuncture between the experiences of urban youth who are mobilizing in inner-city neighborhoods, and the prescriptions for urban youth development coming from “fragmented models of community action and youth agency” (Ginwright & Cammarota, this volume). This disjuncture has led funders and practitioners to begin questioning the utility of social capital frameworks that do not bring issues of identity (race, class, gender, sexual orientation,) and political organizing to the forefront of community youth development theory and practice (Mohamed & Wheeler 2001).

Conclusion

My characterization of social capital theory and practice, as a process thoroughly structured by notions of race, racial difference, racial privilege, racial hierarchy, intersectionalities of class, and the politics of identity, is itself a radical claim. In the current environment of “postracial,” “colorblind,” “cultureblind,” and “meritocratic,” theories of identity and politics, where notions of racism (structural or cultural) are immediately dismissed as remnants of the past, it is more important than ever to understand the racial dimensions of social capital. Given the dearth of research and analysis on race and social capital it is important to remind those who study urban communities (as well as suburban and rural

communities) to include race and racism in their analysis of human capital, cultural and social capital, and political economy. Contemporary scholarship on social capital is explicitly implicated in the process of “conceptual and epistemological de-racialization” of social capital theory (Pierre 2006:13).

A new model needs to be developed that directly addresses “global white supremacy as a political system...a particular kind of polity, so structured, as to advantage whites” (Mills, 1998:99-100). This model should incorporate a broader understanding of social capital that pays careful attention to: (1) race, racism, and processes of racialization; (2) identity-based frameworks; (3) context-dependency; and 4) issues of power within and outside of the ghetto. We have to move to the point where the act of naming and mapping processes of racial subordination is not particularly radical or activist, but rather, part of a collective, normalized global goal, of worldwide black emancipation.

NOTES

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1. According to Bourdieu, “the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent . . . depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected” (1985, p. 249).

2. Even though Bourdieu developed his theory of forms of capital in Algeria and France, the framework still lacks a dynamic understanding of race and culture.

3. Ginwright & Cammarota (this volume) refer to the “hostile laws and unfair policies” that African Americans (of all ages) endure as a part of a “second-class citizenry” (XXXX).
4. This seems to be stating the obvious, but apparently this is still not self-evident to human capitalist theorists who continue to dominant labor theories in American economics. As a point of fact, the idea of meritocracy has become even more widely accepted in the popular imagination since Lounsbury first presented his piece.
5. Coleman’s conceptualization of social capital as relational is a major step in the evolution of the term because, according to Portes (1998), it begin to distinguish among “(a) the possessors of social capital (those making claims); (b) the sources of social capital (those agreeing to these demands); and (c) the resources themselves” (p. 6).
6. According to DeFilippis, “Lounsbury (1977), Bourdieu (1985), and Coleman (1988) all argued that social capital is not embodied in any particular person, but rather is embedded in people’s social relationships. At the same time, however, they also state that social capital was realized by individuals. Putnam, conversely, has argued that social capital is a resource that individuals or groups of people possess or fail to possess” (2001, p. 785).
7. The rapid rise of Putnam’s version of social capital has made the dominant trend in community youth development theory and practice in the 21st century to publish work that embodies a Putnamesque framework where—more often than not—youth are described and encouraged to be “civically engaged,” “civic participants,” “civically skilled,” “civically responsible,” or to “build civic and social capital” (Ginwright, 2003; Kelly, 2004; Kirilin, 2003; Lopez & Stack, 2001; Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001; Sherrod, this volume). In short, community youth development theory and practice in the 21st century encourages all youth to be “civically” *something*.
8. One notable exception is the Pew Charitable Trust’s definition of civic engagement, which is broad and highly elastic: “Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. Civic Engagement encompasses a range of activities such as working in a soup kitchen, serving on a neighborhood association, writing a letter to an elected official or voting” (Delli Carpini, 2000).
9. Patillo (1999) suggests that adulthood for black youth often comes at an later age than for nonblack youth because of family composition and socioeconomic factors.

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¹ “teach, support, encourage, and in effect, socialize young men to meet their responsibilities with regard to the work ethic, family life, the law, and decency,” as cited in Elijah Anderson. *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change, in an Urban Community*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 69. Anderson also notes that there are female oldheads whose responsibility it is to socialize young men and women.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵ “old head of the formal economy to the new head of the underground economy” as cited in Mitchell Duneier. *Sidewalk*. p. 40 (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).

⁶ At times Raymond vacillates between working odd jobs, working as a handyman, and selling stolen goods that he “does not steal himself” for a living. At the same time Raymond does not believe that “the youth should steal,” and “values an education that teaches about black history and culture.”

⁷ The concept of “Hood Habitus” evolved from my work in low-income communities with the Nation of Islam, as well as through conversations with one of my graduate students, Rashawn Ray, at the University of Indiana, Bloomington.