**A Social Capital Framework for the Study of Institutional Agents &**

**Their Role in the Empowerment of Low-status Students & Youth**

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Abstract

This article builds on a sociological account of working-class minority youth development and differential access to social capital—defined in terms of key resources and support provided by institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001, 2004). The article elaborates on the concept of *institutional agents*—specifically, high-status, non-kin, agents who occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system, and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support. New to this body of work is how access to resources and institutional support—among low-status students and youth-- are significantly dependent upon the network characteristics, and network-related capacities, motivations, and inclinations of *resource-ful* institutional agents participating in the social universe of these youth. The article also focuses on the kinds of institutional support such agents are technically able to provide, and on the multiple and simultaneous [help-giving] roles assumed by those who provide this support. Drawing from empowerment theory in critical social work, the article includes a discussion about manifesting one's capacity as an institutional agent in ways that not only enable the authentic *empowerment* of the student or young person, but also "changes their world" in some significant ways.

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**Introduction**

**Contemporary Adolescent Development, Multiple Social Worlds,
& Nonfamily Adult Agents**

**The Influence of Nonparental Adults on the Adolescent Development: A Review**

**A Review of Theoretical Frameworks**

**Social Stratification, Adolescent Development and
Differential Access to Institutional Agents**

**Institutional Agent Defined**

**The Concepts of Social Capital and Social Structure**

**Institutional Support**

**The Motivational and Ideological Characteristics of an Institutional Agent**

**Organizational Cultures Oriented Toward Counterstratification
and Authentic Empowerment**

**Personal and Position Resources**

**Institutional Agents and the Enactment of Multiple and Simultaneous Roles**

**Conclusion**

Scholars have been working to elaborate new conceptual and theoretical frameworks for understanding the social networks, socialization, and educational attainment of racial minority youth, particularly Latino, African American, and Asian youth from working-class or economically-disenfranchised urban communities. Such frameworks are critical precisely because careful efforts to articulate the complexities of socialization, network relations, and educational attainment among racial minority youth, including the multiple roles played by resourceful and committed socialization and institutional agents, can help us to design interventions and school environments that can authentically empower both youth and agents (e.g., parents, teachers, counselors, youth program personnel).

This article offers a social capital framework that highlights and explicates two principal phenomena: first, adolescent participation in multiple sociocultural worlds, and two, the role of *nonfamily adult agents* in the social development and educational attainment of adolescents and young adults across class and racial strata. In spite of the elusive quality that characterizes the concept of social capital in much of the literature, the present framework defines social capital as consisting of resources and key forms of social support embedded in one's network or associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; 2001; 2004).

The concept of *institutional agent* is central to this framework, and is defined as an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively high-status and authority. Such an individual, situated in an adolescent's social network, manifests his or her potential role as an institutional agent, when, on behalf of the adolescent, he or she acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued resources (e.g., high school course requirements for admission to four-year universities). The concept of social capital, as

elaborated here, permits us to look at how adolescents gain access to vital resources through relationships with institutional agents situated within the various sociocultural worlds that comprise their social universe.

The article is divided into three major parts, translated into eight sections, beginning with a contemporary perspective of adolescent socialization and the involvement of a large variety of agents across a complex of different sociocultural worlds and institutions. This early section is followed by a review and methodological critique of the empirical evidence pertaining to the presence and influence of *nonparental adults* in the lives of adolescents. This is followed by an inquiry into past efforts in sociology to develop frameworks to guide research questions specifically on the influence of nonparental adults on adolescent development and educational attainment. At this point, I introduce a framework that focuses on the role of *institutional agents* in the social development and educational attainment of adolescents and young adults. This second part of the article critiques conventional renditions of social capital theory, particularly as applied in the field of education, while introducing the social capital framework showcased in this article, with social capital defined as high-status institutional resources embedded in social relations and social structure. Attention is then given to the motivational and ideological characteristics of institutional agents devoted to the empowerment of low-status youth, which is subsequently situated within *empowerment theory* drawn from the field of critical social work. At this point, the third part and last major section of the article is introduced. I begin with the tenet that the capacity of institutional agents to empower others is largely dependent upon the structure and resourcefulness of their own social networks, as well as their orientation toward effective networking. I provide a number of criteria for evaluating the structure, resourcefulness and network orientations of institutional agents. I conclude with highlighting the transition from

institutional agent to "empowerment agent," with the latter role defined not only in terms of their capacity to provide low-status youth with highly valued institutional resources, but also in terms of their commitment to empower youth with a critical consciousness, and with the means to transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole.

## Contemporary Adolescent Development, Multiple Social Worlds, & Nonfamily Adult Agents

Adolescence is a transitional stage of human development that involves biological (i.e. pubertal), social, and psychological changes in preparation for adulthood. This stage of development is marked by a socialization process whereby youth are actively engaged in social interactions with various individuals, authority figures, groups, and networks, within a complex social universe composed of the sociocultural worlds of the family, community, peer group, the school and other predominant institutions (e.g., police and judicial system; the labor sector).

Building on the work of Boykin (1986), Phelan and associates (1998), Gee (1989), and Stanton-Salazar (1997), socialization is cast here as the process by which young people, engaged with various agents and significant others, learn to negotiate and participate in multiple sociocultural worlds. Effective participation in each world requires adoption or execution of certain social identities, and effective accommodation to a system of values and beliefs, expectations, aspirations, ways of using language, and emotional responses familiar to insiders (Phelan, *et al.,* book; Gee, 1989). Whereas white, middle-class youth encounter a confluence in cultural discourses and practices across social worlds, working-class minority youth often find these worlds are culturally differentiated, each world embodying a distinct cultural discourse, or *ways of being in the world* (Gee, 1989; Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977).

"Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction but by 'apprenticeship' into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (Gee, 1989, p. 7). Within the social worlds outside the family, the proficient execution of the sanctioned discourse and identities, in the context of relations with authority figures, socialization agents, and institutional agents, translates into access to an array of resources, privileges, and rewards. The point to be made here is that learning multiple discourses and participating in distinct, nonfamilial sociocultural worlds, in preparation for adulthood, requires active engagement with various agents within each of these worlds.

The reality today is that adolescents increasingly participate in social worlds outside the orbits of family, peer group, and school; in turn, *agents* working in public and private institutions such as the school, community organizations, commercial centers, religious institutions, the media, social service agencies, government agencies, and employment sites, all exhibit their potential to participate in or to impact the adolescent socialization process, whether through direct engagement, the media, or through policy development (Ianni, 1989).

Certain theoretical fundamentals are thought to be accepted by a large community of scholars regarding adolescent development in general. Foremost is the recognition that for adolescents to successfully meet both developmental challenges in today's world and the academic demands of the school, they require *resource*-ful relationships and activities socially organized within a network of socialization agents, natural or informal mentors, pro-academic peers, and institutional agents distributed throughout the extended family, school, neighborhood, community, and society. Through this network, adolescents receive a whole spectrum of *social* and *institutional support* that contributes to their social development, academic performance, and preparation for adulthood—such support includes the cultural transmission of distinct *discourses,*

access to key funds of knowledge, academic support, advice and guidance, and forms of modeling and training designed to promote effective communication and relational competencies enabling effective help seeking and the reciprocal exchange with different adult and peer networks.

**The Influence of Nonparental Adults on the Adolescent Development: A Review**

Empirical studies on the presence and influence of nonparental adults across the various stages of adolescence continues to grow, mainly in adolescent psychology. Evidence pertaining to the presence and influence of nonparental adults in the lives of adolescents is mixed. One study reported that four out of five 11th graders reported having a nonparental adult who played a very "important" role in their lives; included were older siblings and extended kin (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002). An almost equal number identified kin (57%) and nonkin individuals as their "VIPs" (48%); however, only 7% of nonkin VIPs were teachers. Another study asked whether a nonparental adult had "made an important difference in your life any time since you were 14 years old" (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Approximately three-quarters of the high school sample reported having had such a person. In other studies, the distinct influences of nonparental adults are hidden in measures of "supportive adults." Woolley and Bowen (2007), using a sample of over 8,000 middle school pupils, "many of them with significant risk factors in their lives, have demonstrated that of the various variables they examined, social capital—defined here as the number of supportive adults in students' lives—had the strongest relationship to school engagement." In spite of the mixed findings and methodological weaknesses of many of these studies, mounting evidence shows that those who identify an important nonparental adult in their lives tend to report better psychological well-being, more rewarding relationships

with parents and others, academic success, higher school completion, better employment experiences, and fewer problems with peers  (Bryant & Zimmerman, 2003; Bubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Greenberger, Chen, and Beam, 1998; McDonald, et al., 2007; Rhodes, Ebert, & Fischer, 1992; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002).

Although such findings lend credence to the perspective that nonparental adults play an increasingly important role in adolescent development and young adulthood, few studies approach this topic with methodological rigor.  In particular, differences in access to developmentally empowering nonparental adults between poor, working-class, and middle-class adolescents have not been well addressed.  Although many nonparental adults and extended kin can make positive contributions to the socialization and development of youth, not all may have the human, cultural, and social capital to truly alter an adolescent's social mobility—particularly when we are speaking about working-class youth and their constricted social universe.  Working-class nonparental adults and extended kin may contribute in the form of helping to inculcate particular aspirations, values, norms, and mores, or to engender a positive ethnic identity; but nonparental adults (identified in a study) may not have the "capital" to exert authority over a school administrator, or to introduce the adolescent into a peer group that itself is embedded in community of adults poised to ensure that talents are cultivated and where 'college-going' becomes part of everyone's identity (Ianni, 1989; Lareau, 2003; Gibson, Gandara, & Koyama, 2004).

As mentioned, measurement issues stand out as well.  Interview protocols where adolescents can identify the existence of a "very important" nonparental adult do not give us data on the extent to which nonparental, nonkin adults are either regular sources of *social support* or are tacitly yet extensively involved in channeling high-status institutional resources to

adolescents.  In response to the limited data on adolescent social networks, Stanton-Salazar and

Spina (2003) examined the social networks of 47 Mexican-origin high school students with

working-class immigrant parents; networks were examined using both network data and

ethnographic interviews (San Diego Study). Only 20% of the sample identified either a *friend of*

*the family* or *a nonkin adult in the community* as a source of social support and as an "informal

mentor" (school personnel not counted); three quarters did identify either an *older sibling* or

*extended family member.*

In a study by Stanton-Salazar (1995), the social networks of 145 Mexican-origin high

school students with working-class immigrant parents were examined, with a focus on the

prevalence of school personnel as sources of emotional, personal, and informational support

(Bay Area Study).  Here, only 6.2% of the sample elected at least one school staff member as a

source of *emotional support.*  In terms of *material support, help with schoolwork,* and *advice*

*regarding personal matters,* only slightly more than 1 in 4 elected at least one school staff

member as a source of such support.  In terms seven different forms of information (including

personal advice on academic decisions), the findings are more sanguine, with 71% electing a

school staff member as a source of such support.  Close to 30% did not identify at least one

school staff person; it is important to note that positive interactions between a student and a

number of teachers may have positive consequences with regard to feelings of inclusion

(Wehlage, *et al.,* 1989), but this may not translate into the seeking of key forms of support from

school personnel.

Although there is growing empirical support for the positive consequences of nonparental

adult engagement in adolescent social networks, we must not lose sight that many adolescents,

particularly of working-class backgrounds, do not experience such engagement.  In the Stanton-

Salazar Bay Area study (1995), within this working-class Mexican-origin sample, those who were highly bilingual and who reported high educational expectations were most likely to name a school staff member as sources of social support; those with depressed expectations and English-language learners were the least likely to incorporate school personal into their social support system. Within an overview of those class-analytic studies that have examined both working-class and middle-class adolescent populations, class background and race do matter (Cross, 1990; Ianni, 1989; Lareau, 2003; Williams & Kornblum, 1985). Except for those working-class parents that manage to get their children into a formal mentoring program (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2002), most working-class youth experience in difficulty in establishing resource-ful relationships with nonparental adult figures. In contrast, in middle-class families, both parents and adolescents themselves coordinate to incorporate nonparental adult figures into their social networks (Ianni; 1989; Lareau, 2003; see Zhou & Kim, 2006, & Fong, 2003, on *Chinese Language Schools* in Chinese-American communities ).

**A Review of Theoretical Frameworks**

In spite of the empirical research on nonparental adults, some scholars lament that such studies lack a clear theoretical dimension; more specifically, they state that more work on the development of theoretical frameworks is necessary to guide research questions on the particular and direct influence of *nonparental adults* on adolescent development (Eccles & Gootman, 2001; Morrow, 1999). Part of the problem may be interdisciplinary; those researchers trained in psychology and adolescent development may not be making the necessary investments in scholarly areas such as sociologically-informed models of minority child development (Boykin, 1986; Cochran, *et al.,* 1990; Garcia Coll *et al.,* 1996), sociology, (Lareau, 2003; Stanton-Salazar,

2001), ethnic studies (e.g., Zhou & Kim, 2006), educational research (*re: teachers,* Thompson, 2004), and social work (Lee, 2001); thus, many scholars may be missing emergent studies relevant to the study of non-parental adults in adolescent development (e.g., ethnographic and qualitative studies on the extracurricular influence of *school teachers*).

In sociology, attention to nonparental adults has focused on the mediating role of *teachers,* as socialization agents, in the relationship between socioeconomic background and eventual educational and occupational attainment (Sewell & Hauser, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Of ultimate interest is social stratification, or the reproduction of systemic inequalities between groups; as applied here, the task has centered on accounting for how working-class youth become working-class adults, and how middle-class youth become middle-class adults. Socialization processes during childhood and adolescence are theorized to play an important and mediating role in social stratification, with specific attention to the role of parents, teachers, and peers, as key agents.

Social relations between youth and their families and immediate community milieu operate to socialize youth into a particular [primary] discourse, *a way of being in the world* entailing certain social identities, and a system of values and beliefs, expectations, psycho-motivational orientation, educational aspirations, ways of using language, and emotional responses to stressors. Within the social world of the school, however, the potential for "success" and reward is evaluated on the basis of whether the student can demonstrate and exercise the dominant discourse in society (i.e., white, middle-class, male-centric discourse, with its stress on *individualism;* see Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The greater the ability of a student to do so (or at least to demonstrate a determined effort and perseverance in exercising this discourse), the greater the probability that teachers and school personnel will communicate high academic

expectations, assign good grades, while providing academic support and genuine encouragement. As Porter (1976) argues, [high] grades signify the internalization of the total socialization agenda.

Following this "status attainment" model in liberal sociology (Sewell & Hauser, 1980), this pattern of socialization is aided by processes of academic identity formation. In this model, adolescents, as social beings, become deeply influenced by perceptions and evaluation of both teachers and classroom peers toward the self; in the course of time, such appraisals are internalized and thus become reflected in the adolescent's view of themselves, as well as manifested in the adolescent's corresponding educational aspirations. Thus, to a great extent, the process of social and academic differentiation, particularly observable during the high school years, is attributed to the cumulative effect of individual self-assessments (grounded in the adolescent's perceptions of how "significant others" perceive his or her academic and intellectual potential), to his or her corresponding educational aspirations, and on a deeper level, to the *influences of significant others* upon which such self-assessments and aspirations are based. These self-assessments and aspirations, together with the academic encouragement provided by teachers, drive individual effort engagement and degree of investment in school, which in turn, largely determine educational attainment (Sewell & Hauser, 1980).

The framework represented by the status attainment tradition above emphasizes one major way in which "connections" manifest between adolescents and nonfamily adult agents (in this case, teachers and school personnel), specifically in the context of socialization and educational attainment. However, the status attainment tradition fails to adequately address key aspects of social structure that affect all social relations in society. The status attainment model exists in a sociopolitical vacuum and fails to direct critical attention to those institutionalized

structures of class and racial segregation that determine the quality of schools in different communities, the historic practice of curriculum tracking (Oakes, 2005; Lucas, 1999), and regular and facilitated access to high-status cultural forms and institutions (e.g., museums, theater, exposure to the arts) (DiMaggio, 1982).

## Social Stratification, Adolescent Development and Differential Access to Institutional Agents

The reality is that child and adolescent development occur in the context of interlocking subsystems of social stratification—principally, the societal hierarchies of class, race, and gender. Although "fundamental developmental processes (e.g., cognitive, affective, and social) emerge in similar fashion across racially, ethnically, class- and gender-diverse populations," (Garcia Coll, *et al,* 1996, p. 1893), emergent differences in youth development, academic achievement, and life chances are core constructions of a society characterized by post-industrial capitalism, persistent racial segregation and institutionalized racism, and reformed yet persistent patriarchy.

The framework featured in this article is network-analytic, and rests on a sociological account of working-class minority youth development and differential access to social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001, 2004). This framework focuses on a key feature of social stratification too often neglected in studies of adolescent development and of both social inequality and empowerment processes—specifically, instrumental relationships with high-status, non-kin, *institutional agents* who occupy relatively high positions in the multiple dimensional stratification system, and who are well positioned to provide key forms of social and institutional support. I draw from two thesis statements presented in my previous work (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

First, for all children and youths, healthy human development, general well-being, school success, and economic and social integration in society, depend upon regular and unobstructed opportunities for constructing instrumental relationships with *institutional agents* across socioculural worlds, and across key social spheres and institutional domains dispersed throughout community and society (Wynn, *et al.,* 1987). The provision and utilization of resources, of course, never operates in a cultural or political vacuum, precisely because the process is embedded in a system of social stratification; this leads, then, to the second thesis statement, that for low-status youth, the development of supportive relations with eligible institutional agents, and access to key forms of institutional support, are systematically complex and problematic.[1]

This article introduces a third thesis statement: Although stratification forces in society shape the predominant pattern, *countervailing* forces and interventions within the family, the community, the school, and other key agencies help selected youth construct *egocentric* networks characterized by trusting relations with institutional agents who provide authentic social and institutional support (i.e., social capital) (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 22).[2] These countervailing forces and interventions are fundamental to our definition of *empowerment,* defined here as "the active participatory process of gaining resources [and] competencies needed to increase control over one's life and accomplish important life goals" (Maton & Salem, 1995).

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[1] Although the focus here is on working-class, urban minority youth, I use the term *low-status* because I believe that much of my argument also applies to working-class youth in general, and to girls across class and racial categories

[2] The analysis of an *egocentric network* begins with the focal individual (often called *ego*), then identifies all the people (sometimes called *alters*) whom these focal individual identifies as being associated with them, or as sources of different kinds of social support.

**Institutional Agent Defined**

An institutional agent can be defined as an individual who occupies one or more hierarchical positions of relatively *high-status,* either within a society or in an institution (or an organization). Thus, such an individual is accustomed to occupying positions of status and of authority, and managing and accessing highly-valued resources, exercising key forms of power, and mobilizing his or her reputation in purposive action (see Lin, 2001, p. 37). Relative to others, the individual possesses a high degree of *human, cultural, and social capital.* The individual's or actor's potential role as "institutional agent" becomes manifest when, on behalf of another, he or she acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly-valued *institutional support*, defined for now in terms of those *resources, opportunities, privileges,* and *services* which are highly valued, yet differentially allocated within any organization or society that is invested in social inequality and in hierarchical forms of control and organization. Similarly, the actor becomes an 'agent' when other major forms of 'institutional support' are mobilized to benefit another, such as when he or she uses his or her position, status and *authority,* or exercises key forms of power, and/or uses his or her *reputation,* in a strategic and supportive fashion.

The story of Michael Dulworth, author of the book, *The Connect Effect,* offers a superb example of value of institutional agents in the world of business (2008). Dulworth was interested in buying a company he could build, realizing that building a company from the ground-up was incredibly difficult. He also realized getting expert help was far better than going solo. Dulworth tapped his network of business associates and reconnected with Rich Silton, a long-time associate who had sold his company and was helping people buy and sell small companies. Silton helped Dulworth develop a plan of action for approaching a company and coached him

through the entire process. Next, another close associate of Dulworth, Frank Bordonaro, knowing of Dulworth's desire to buy a company, connected him to Jim Bolt, who ran a well-respected consulting firm. Dulworth comments that the only reason Bolt met with him was because of his connection with Bordonaro, whom Bolt respected, and the fact that both Dulworth and Bolt had both gone to the University of Michigan. Bolt and Dulworth soon learned that they knew many people in common. In the end, Bolt and Dulworth, with the assistance of Rich Silton, negotiated Dulworth's purchase of the consulting firm founded by Bolt.

Within the upper strata of society, *institutional agents* are identified as those societal actors who act to maintain the advantages of other actors and groups who share similar attributes, high-status positions and social backgrounds (e.g., business owners; university alumni; executive members of a corporation; the leadership of upper-middle-class associations; upper middle-class high school students); this networking however, operates in the context of societal and institutional forms of *inclusion* and *exclusion* (e.g., networks which correspond to residential and occupational segregation by class, race, and gender; shared credentials from high-status universities which facilitate bonding and network relations). Institutional agents operate the gears of social stratification and societal inequality. Within the lower strata of society, many lower-status members of society do find ways to empower themselves, and it is often with the aid of supportive relationships with certain high-status institutional agents who act strategically to provide them with institutional support (e.g., social workers, community and labor organizers, teachers, etc.) (Chattopadhay, 2010; Corwin, 2008; Lee, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Working-class, middle-class, and upper-class people are known to be embedded in quite different social networks (Fischer, 1982; Cochran, *et al,* 1990). Upper-class and upper-middle-class people, and some middle-class individuals, are able to construct *cosmopolitan networks,* a

set of relationships with a diverse constellation of people that include different kinds of

*institutional agents* who can provide privileges, institutional resources, opportunities for career

mobility, wealth creation, political empowerment and the school achievement of children. Such

institutional agents operate and work in institutions, organizations, community installations, and

positions that primarily or exclusively serve high-status communities and populations (Ianni,

1989; Lareau, 2003). The higher the class position of the individual, the more likely he or she is

embedded in social networks that afford high levels of accessibility to institutional agents with

high degrees of human, cultural and social capital, and who are situated in high-status positions

characterized by highly-valued societal resources (see Table A1).

Institutional agents also work in institutions, schools, organizations, community

installations, and positions that primarily or exclusively serve a diverse spectrum of middle class

individuals and populations, providing valued 'connections' to resourceful networks and key

forms of 'institutional support' (Ianni, 1989; Lareau, 2003).  They can render services for

payment, or as part of the infrastructure of middle-class communities, including educational

institutions and youth-serving organizations and installations (Ianni, 1989; Kozol, 1991).

"Gate-keeping agents," in contrast, work in institutions, schools, organizations,

community installations, and positions that serve a *mixture* of people and communities

differentiated by class, race and ethnicity.  Whether consciously or unconsciously, such agents

are oriented toward rendering services and providing institutional support to those privileged by

class or race, to those who exhibit the dominant cultural discourse (i.e., *cultural capital*)*,* and to

those who demonstrate institutionalized symbols of merit and ability (Bourdieu & Passerson,

1977; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Lucas, 1999).  Their actions reflect an uncritical adherence to

social structure and the stratification system of the institution or organization.

Among lower-status members of society (e.g., youth from working-class and ethnic minority communities), access to institutional support is usually an extraordinary phenomenon, and happens through involvement *via* relationships with committed institutional agents through special school and educational programs, social service agencies, different and effective intervention and mentor programs --*social capital* for purposes of intervention or empowerment (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Jarrett *et al.,* 2005; Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Maeroff, 1989; Schneider, 2006; Stanton-Salazar, Vásquez, & Mehan, 2000).

In the context of the development and empowerment of low-status youth, educators, social workers, intervention program staff, and similar others *become* 'institutional agents' when they mobilize or directly provide resources and support to a student or youth that significantly enables the latter to effectively navigate and exert control over the principal environments within which he or she is embedded; first and foremost, to safely navigate the potentially oppressive ecological aspects of neighborhood, community, school, and society, while reaping the benefits of those ecological aspects that are developmentally empowering (Garcia Coll *et al,* 1996; Stanton-Salazar, 2001, Chapters 3 & 4). Educators, youth workers, and informal mentors also become 'institutional agents' when they mobilize or directly provide resources to one or more other institutional actors (i.e., colleagues) that either enable the latter to effectively actualize the role of institutional agent on behalf of a student or youth, or enable these actor/agents to collaborate in empowering low-status students or youth in some significant way (Quintanar, 2007).

**Personal and Position Resources**

Institutional agents possess or have access to two major categories of institutional resources. Positional resources are those that are linked to an advantageous *position* within a

hierarchically-arranged organization, network, institution, or social system. As Lin states, "the occupant of a position may change, but *the resources are attached to the position*" (2001, p. 33) [*emphasis mine*]. Unlike positional resources, *personal resources* are in the possession of individual actors who can use or transmit these resources "without needing to receive specific authorization or be accountable to other actors" (Lin, 2001, p. 42) or to the rules inherent in certain positions within an organization.

**Institutional Support**

The importance of supportive ties to institutional agents in the social development, school success, and status attainment of children and youth is articulated here using the concept of *institutional support,* which refers to key resources and forms of social support which function to ensure children and adolescents become effective participants within institutional spheres that control resources and network pathways associated with different forms of empowerment, during adolescence and early adulthood, including school achievement, class mobility, and self-determination. The school system is, of course, the most important of these institutional spheres.

In my 1997 published essay and in my book (2001, pp. 268-269), drawing from the literature on mentorship (Jacobi, 1991; Rhodes, 2002), I introduced six key forms of institutional support. Table A1 begins with a slightly broader spectrum of resources and support from the mentorship literature (Jacobi, 1991); then to this spectrum, I add those resources and forms of support highlighted in the *social work* literature that emphasizes the empowerment of low-status individuals and communities (Heffernan, *et al,* 1997; Hepworth, *et al.,* 2006 ). The list is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather, is meant to convey the depth and complexity of institutional support in the process of authentic empowerment of low-status individuals.

**Institutional Agents and the Enactment of Multiple and Simultaneous Roles**

Eligible actors fulfill their potential as institutional agents by enacting one or more various roles; these roles can be characterized by the kind of *institutional support* and resources they provide to the young person or student (or to a colleague collaborating to empower one or more youth). The most important point here is that institutional agents can fulfill multiple roles with a particular recipient, and when they do so, their potential to empower an individual increases considerably.

In my 2001 book, I differentiate between *multistranded relations* between student and teacher and *multiplex relations* (pp. 182-183). Multistranded relationships are those involving multiple roles or functions; for example, teachers often take on the latent and informal roles of *co-parent, advocate, counselor, [informal] social worker, knowledge agent,* and *informal mentor,* although teachers are rarely recognized or compensated for these role enactments (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, Chapter 8). In contrast, the manifestation of these informal roles in routine interactions between coaches and athletes appear not only more explicit and visible, but also more positively sanctioned by the school system. In the framework presented here, adult actors manifest their capacity as institutional agents through enacting a variety of roles, some focused on the process of directly providing key forms of institutional support (e.g., transmitting *funds of knowledge*; teaching youth how to network with key institutional agents), while other roles focus on key forms of networking (e.g., introducing a student to an important school administrator; negotiating agreements between two or more parties). The first two examples correspond, respectively, to the role of "Knowledge Agent" and the role of "Networking Coach," while the second two examples correspond to the role of "Bridging Agent" and the role of "Institutional Broker." Informed by the literature in social work (Heffernan, *et al,* 1997), Table 1

introduces twelve different roles regularly assumed by institutional agents, including "Empowerment Agent."

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Insert Table 1 about here
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The definitions of *multiplex relations* and *multistranded relations* are indeed complementary (2001, p. 225); the concept of *multiplex relations* conveys that agents, in the context of a relationship, can provide a spectrum of 'institutional support' to a student or youth. Relations between agent and beneficiary can solidify around one particular kind of resource or support (i.e., *uniplex relations*), or can incorporate multiple forms of support (i.e., *multiplex relations*). By definition, the classic role of *mentor* embodies both a multiplex and multistranded relationship.

Although in my 2001 volume, the emphasis was on instances of uniplex and multiplex support that were reportedly extended to students (e.g., advocacy, funds of knowledge); in the framework provided here, we include in our foci the role requirements, skill-set, and ideology assumed by an agent when providing a certain kind of support (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Thus, while "advocacy" is one important form of 'institutional support,' necessary attention is also directed to the actions, role requirements, network composition and structure, network orientation, and skill-sets subsumed under the role of "advocate." For example, with regard to "Bridging Agent" and "Institutional Broker" (Table 1), the actor should have a well amplified social network, active connections with various key *alters,* and a good knowledge of the resources that these alters possess. Such role requirements go a long way toward determining the *quality of the support* provided.

**The Concepts of Social Capital and Social Structure**

Social capital is one of the most influential theoretical concepts in contemporary sociology. However, clear definitions have been scarce. A few sociologists such as Nan Lin (2001) have spent a good part of their career attempting to bring scientific specificity to the concept. Although one increasingly finds criticisms regarding undertheorized and oversimplified usages of the concept, nonetheless, new variants continue to appear, perhaps because the concept addresses social phenomena that have been of interest to social scientists throughout the 20th century. Due to the utility in explaining basic problems associated with a decline in sociability in many contemporary communities in postmodern American society, theories of social capital have also come to pervade the lexicon in policy circles (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998).

The concept of *social capital* represents a central feature of the framework presented here, and is derived from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), from Nan Lin's more recent theorizations (Lin, 2001), and from Stanton-Salazar's concept of *counterstratification* (2001). Before continuing with the framework elaborated here, it is important that we briefly review some of the principal ways in which social capital has been conceptualized within distinctive intellectual traditions in the social sciences.

In describing the more conventional use of social capital, particularly as applied in education and status attainment literatures, I have used the term *normative framework* for convenience. Early scholarship on "significant others" and educational attainment (Sewell & Hauser, 1980) appear to have laid the groundwork for contemporary renditions of social capital that emphasize both socialization and social integration. Close relations or "connections" with parents, school personnel, and pro-academic peers each play a potentially key role through

socialization processes that help shape a pro-academic identity and future educational aspirations, and that facilitate adherence to the educational system's moral order and ideological foundations (Parsons, 1959; Dreeban, 1968; Sewell & Hauser, 1980). In sum, theorizations guided by normative frameworks emphasize the inculcation of pro-academic values and cognitive dispositions and the enforcement of pro-academic norms.

A parallel tradition, in the field of education and exemplified by the work of Wehlage and associates (Wehlage *et al.,* 1989), emphasizes key integrative processes within the school; through *bonding* between the student and school personnel, the student becomes "attached, committed, involved and has belief in the norms, activities and people of an institution" (Wehlage *et al.,* 1989, p. 117). I have summarized this view of bonding and integration as follows (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 13):

> When such bonding between agent and student becomes a defining characteristic of the school community as whole, students experience a certain "we-ness," a collective identity that is highly consonant with increased effort engagement and academic achievement. In sum: school personnel treat students in a caring manner, creating the conditions for "bonding"; in turn, students come to identify with, and conform to, the established order; now integrated, students experience a heightened degree of motivation and make the necessary efforts to meet academic demands.

This attention to integrative properties of organizations such as the school has much in common with the theoretical contributions of James Coleman (1988), who has done much to popularize the concept of social capital in both the social sciences and in policy circles. Coleman emphasized the ability of some communities to establish a highly-dense social web of relations, a groundwork of trust and reciprocity, and the accumulation of experiences of mutual

benefit, which together, allow the formation and enforcement of norms and sanctions that

encourage people to work for a common cause. These properties, or structural characteristics, of

social networks, (i.e., *high-density networks, trust, reciprocity, norms and sanctions*) guide social

life within the community and create forms of power and influence in community social

interactions. These network properties are treated as "social capital" of certain communities and

organizations.

Many have lodged strong criticisms of Coleman's framework (e.g., Morrow, 1999) and

of other similar integration or normative frameworks (Wehlage *et al,* 1989; see Stanton-Salazar,

2001). Such theoretical frameworks exist in a sociopolitical vacuum, without necessary attention

to social and economic history. Coleman and many others who use the concept of social capital

fail to give adequate attention to those societal forces and conditions that permit some

communities to accumulate multiple forms of capital, while subjecting other communities to

inferior social services, residential segregation, poor quality schools, and blocked opportunities

in the job market due to class and/or racial discrimination (Kerckhoff, 1976; Ogbu, 1991;

Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

In contrast to normative-integrative frameworks, represented most especially by

Coleman, a critical network-analytic view of social capital strives toward a comprehensive

understanding of society, particularly as modeled in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu

(1986, p. 248) defined social capital as "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 and recognition." Bourdieu's definition is rooted in a framework that

accounts for the complexities entailed in the social reproduction of class inequality—specifically

in the domination of the upper and middle-classes in French society. We also rely on Nan Lin's

(1999; 2001) definition of social capital, due to it's refined and explicit articulation of resources, social structure and hierarchy, *as resources--embedded in a social structure--that are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions*.

Social capital consists of resources and key forms of *institutional support* embedded in *multilayered* system of social structures--beginning with a fundamental network-analytic structure (i.e., relationships, networks, and associations as *social mediums*) which, in turn, is embedded in complex and usually hierarchical structures found in formal and complex organizations and institutions (e.g., schools, universities, firms, corporations). In the framework presented here, resources are most directly embedded in a social medium, in a *relationship* or *network,* with this social medium characterized by two basic sets of structural properties: (*i*), its *configurational* properties (e.g., strength of tie or relationship; density of network), and (*ii*), its *integrative* properties (e.g., mutual investment in relationship, trust, norm of reciprocity). In turn, a social medium and its structural properties are embedded in (and are affected by) larger, more complex social structures, usually hierarchical in nature. At this level of analysis, Lin (2001) defines *social structure* as consisting of positions that (*i*), possess differential amounts of one or more types of valued resources, (*ii*), are hierarchically related relative to the control of and access to resources, (*iii*), share certain *rules* and procedures in the use of the resources, and (*iv*), are entrusted to institutional agents who *act on* these rules and procedures (p. 33).

[Hierarchical] social structure—at the *micro, organizational, institutional*, and *community* levels-- is the *motor* that propels all relationships, whether between individuals, or between groups in society; it is social structure that makes relationships *resource-generating,* thus, enduring. In another work (Stanton-Salazar, 2004, p. 27), I convey the dynamics of hierarchy and social structure as they affect relationships and networks:

The rules of [social structure] facilitate forms of solidarity and instant membership in

"community" among those who occupy similar locations in the hierarchy. Thus, actors

are able to immediately "connect" with resourceful others by activating social structure

(i.e., by accelerating "the motor"), by adhering to the rules of hierarchy, [by

communicating *via* the same discourse], by identifying their location in the larger social

organization and establishing legitimate relationship. On the basis of this social structure,

actors are then able to advance the investment process on a more personal level and to

sooner or later turn this investment into forms of support that facilitate the

accomplishment of personal or collective goals (e.g., admission into the university;

moving into a principalship of a school through "connections").

Social structure also conveys to institutional agents in high-status positions the established rules

for the allocation of resources to those lower in one or more principal hierarchies (e.g. age,

credentials, socioeconomic status, race). In the context of the school and its social structures,

teachers and school personnel, usually in an unconscious and uncritical manner, regularly

gravitate toward and reward those students (e.g., grades, knowledge funds) who exhibit high-

status social characteristics (race, gender, class background), and who successfully exercises the

proper *discourse* [or display the right *cultural capital*]—thus, signaling the student's

internalization of the school's total *socialization agenda* (Porter, 1976; Bowles & Gintis, 1976;

Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977).

In this context, social capital is an outcome of various successful communications and

exchanges between student and teacher--that is, of a successful relationship, as defined within a

conventional social order: (*i*) the student who effectively exhibits "ability" and academic

potential *via* society's dominant and high-status discourse; (*ii*) a student-teachers relationship

that is an accumulated outcome of mutual investments; the student who invests herself in a relationship with the teacher, and the teacher who reciprocates with investment in the student, and the student who pledges her continued loyalty to the teacher. Indeed, mutual investment, obligations, and reciprocity are the heart of social capital.

A letter of recommendation from a highly-recognized teacher, advocating for a student's admission into a university, constitutes a form of social capital for the student—a resource rooted both in the teacher's *position* as head of the English department, and in her own *personal* resources (her accumulated human and cultural capital). The student can use this letter (as a highly valuable resource) to achieve a certain goal (admission to a university). This example can be the outcome of a successful relationship, either set within a school context oriented toward the social reproduction of inequality (Bourdieu & Passerson, 1977), or within a school context where some teachers (or many) are oriented toward *counterstratification* and the empowerment of low-status students.

As Lin (2001) argues, the persistence of complex social structures depends on the reliable adherence to the structure's rules and procedures, particularly among those who are located in the upper levels of the hierarchy and who control resources. "Selection of occupants, [then] favors those who are socialized and trained to carry out these rules and procedures" (p. 34). In the framework presented here, I define *social capital* within a conflict model that highlights the contradictory and simultaneous dynamics of structured inequality *and* of empowerment (Collins 1971, 1974; Carnoy & Levin, 1985). Following Bourdieu, social capital is primarily a mechanism of privilege and domination, precisely because it is embedded in hierarchical, integrated, and reproductive social structures (i.e., emphasis here on systems of stratification: *race, class,* and *gender*). In contrast, the concept of "empowerment social capital," captures the

possibility that institutional agents can act, individually or collectively—within the larger

hierarchical structure--in ways that redistribute resources according to *motives* articulated in the

service of social justice and *counterstratification* (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

Indeed, institutional agents are often posed with "opportunities to act according to their

own interpretations" and their often ideological agendas and motivations (Lin, 2001, p. 34).  It

would seem then, appropriate to redefine social capital, *as resources embedded in social

structure--and* in the possibility of acting counter to the structure (i.e., *agency* and *counter-

stratification* as the counterpart to hierarchical and reproductive social structures). This opens up,

of course, the possibility that social capital, as exclusive and highly-valued resources, is also

embedded in the potential and *processes of empowerment*—and that institutional agents have the

capacity to go *counter* to the established social structure, and to 'alter the destinies' of those

located in the lower rungs of hierarchy who typically are not allocated the institution's high-

status resources and rewards (see Williams & Kornblum, 1985, Chapter 2, on "Superkids"; see

Stanton-Salazar, 2001, Chapter 8).   In the example above, a teacher, motivated by principles of

social justice and equity, can advocate and distribute resources to those low-status students he

sees as normally not benefitting from the school's stock of institutional resources (e.g., college

preparatory curriculum, information regarding college admission requirements and financial aid).

Thus, we can begin to envision a framework that situates the provision of resources and

institutional support to working-class minority youth in the context of both individual and

collective strategies that *counter* the social structures that would normally exclude these youth

(and their familial and peer networks) in the allocation of society's resources and privileges (e.g.,

access to high-quality schools, recruitment into academic-enrichment courses and programs).

*Empowerment social capital*, then, specifically refers to those resources and forms of

institutional support which are embedded in *"connections"* or relationships with high-status, resourceful, institutional agents oriented to go counter to *the system*. The processes of empowerment, however, are quite complex and challenging.

Those resources and relationships, when oriented toward the empowerment of low-status individuals, are embedded in a context defined by the contradictory play between *agency* and empowerment, and the exclusionary and reproductive properties of *social structure* on the other. In the latter case, we refer to organization/institutional realities that make problematic the development of supportive relations with eligible institutional agents, and access to key forms of institutional support (e.g., curriculum tracking; Lucas, 1999). Nonetheless, many individuals, acting as institutional agents, embrace the challenge of devising individual and collective strategies that *counter* the exclusionary forces inhering in societal structures; sometimes these strategies include the construction of out-of-school organizational sites and community agencies oriented toward empowering low-status youth with institutional support (Maeroff, 1998; see Zhou & Kim, 2006 and Fong, 2003).

Thus, *social capital*—as elaborated here--is fundamentally constituted in terms of resources or forms of 'institutional support' accessible by ego (e.g., a student) through their direct or indirect social ties to other actors who assume the role of institutional agents (e.g., a school counselor). The importance and utility of this idea is that people are able to accomplish meaningful goals through their access to resources *not* their own. Empowerment social capital, in turn, is constituted in terms of forms of institutional support provided by agents who are motivated to go *against the grain,* and to enable the empowerment of low-status individuals in need.

At it's best, a framework grounded in the concepts of *institutional support, institutional*

*agents*, *social capital* and *empowerment* reveals its capacity to articulate many of the

complexities entailed in the reproduction of social inequality in society (Bourdieu, 1986; Lin,

2001; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001).  However, this framework also reveals its significant

capacity to guide us in elaborating, in holistic fashion, all of the elements entailed in the notion

of a "social support system," a system oriented toward the complex processes of *empowerment*

of low-status students and youths.


**Problems in the Provision of Institutional Support**

As stated above, empowerment social capital is embedded in a context of structured

inequality and its continual reproduction (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).  Although social capital

in society is primarily a mechanism of privilege and domination, with many institutional agents

socialized into the rules of hierarchy, gate-keeping, and legitimating ideology, other institutional

agents, poised to enable the empowerment of individuals from historically-oppressed

communities, comprise the resistance. Others are caught within the contradictory dynamics of

inequality, gate-keeping, and empowerment--a battleground where many institutional agents,

particularly within the school system, are subjected to contradictory forces competing over their

implicit roles and underlying functions in the stratification system (Carnoy & Levin, 1985).

Three major, overlapping realities are seen to be responsible for making the development

of supportive relations with eligible institutional agents, and access to key forms of *institutional*

*support,* systematically complex and frequently problematic for students and youth from

oppressed communities.  First, class and racial forms of segregation and social antagonisms

existing in the wider society very often penetrate local institutions.  Those very cultural

discourses and tacit rules that create forms of power and influence in social interaction among members of dominant groups and that create investment strategies and forms of support, simultaneously function in ways that exclude others from these same resources and forms of support (Stanton-Salazar, 2004). These aspects of social structures operate to problematize working-class and minority youth's connections to institutional agents and to resourceful networks—taken-for-granted *connections* experienced by middle-class youth, their families and communities, and facilitated by the constellations of institutions that serve them—first and foremost, the school (Ianni, 1989; Lareau, 2003; Prado, 2010).

At its core, authentically-supportive relationships between working-class minority adolescents and eligible institutional agents require the construction of interpersonal trust, solidarity, and shared meaning in the context of institutional realities, defined by the often rigid hierarchical distance between agent and youth, the preeminence of the dominant discourse, the dependency on public institutions by working-class youth and families, and latent animosities and distrust rooted in the societal social structures of race and class. Differences in ethnicity, race, gender, social class, and cultural perspectives and values become obstacles to institutional support and forms of empowerment within institutional contexts ambivalent over *diversity* and true equality (e.g., within school, equal access to intellectually-enriched and culturally-validating curricula). Cultural commonalities between individual agents and youth and thus, the potential for forging trusting relations and solidarity, may be undermined if the greater institutional context sends multiple signals of its deep investment in society's status quo. Given that working-class and minority children and youths are structurally more dependent on non-familial institutional agents for various forms of institutional support difficult to attain elsewhere, the problematics of interweaving extended trust and solidarity become everso salient, especially

because in the absence of such solidarity, institutional support rarely occurs (Stanton-Salazar &
Dornbusch, 1995; Mehan, *et al.,* 1996).

Second, for low-status youth, opportunities for constructing interpersonal trust and shared
meaning with institutional agents are also typically embedded within dominant institutions with
strong *socialization* functions—particularly the school; this is to say that youth and agents
committed to going counter to the stratification system often struggle to *connect* in the face of
socialization agendas within the school and the educational institution oriented toward class
reproduction and cultural assimilation—the preeminence of *values and ideology, organizational
rules, behavioral norms, enforced rituals, forms of consciousness, and identities* which
unquestioningly adhere to the *status quo* may overwhelm isolated efforts that go counter to
stratification forces (Boykin, 1986; Fine, 1991; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999). The
complexities of rigid hierarchical relations, an emphasis on discipline and control, and latent
reproductive socialization agendas within such institutions may create a culture of widespread
and aggressive forms of enforcement and repression that adversely affect both eligible
institutional agents and youth.

Third, potentially-eligible agents well-positioned in the upper levels of an organization's
hierarchy may be subject to bureaucratic and personal agendas that may have little to do with
ensuring the construction of authentically-supportive relations between the eligible agents of the
organization and the youth it purports to serve.  Budgetary pressures, accountability schemes,
personnel management, and prestige-enhancing agendas may override whatever organized efforts to
embed youth in a system of institutional and social support (see Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 18).

**The Motivational and Ideological Characteristics of an Empowerment Agent**

In this section we introduce the concept of "empowerment agent," a concept which highlights the motivational and ideological characteristics of those adults willing to go counter to the established and hierarchical social structures. Within any youth- or student-serving institution, we usually find a large pool of eligible actors who could consistently assume the role of *empowerment agent* on behalf of low-status youth.  Whether they actually do so on a regular basis depends, in large part, on at least five characteristics: (1), the degree to which they are aware of the social structural forces within society and within their institution that function to problematize the success of low-status students (e.g., low financial resources, lack of recruitment and retention efforts); (2), on their level of critical awareness that the success of low-status students or youth within the institution is contingent on their receiving systematic and tailored provisions of 'institutional support'; (3), on their willingness to *not* act on the established *rules* of social structure that serve the purpose of consolidating resources within the upper levels of the hierarchy (e.g., advocating only for students in advanced placement courses); (4), on the contents of their identity and their ideological commitments—particularly, on whether they identify themselves as one of those agents responsible for advocating on behalf of the low-status students and for providing them with varied forms of 'institutional support';  and (5), their motivation and willingness to be identified by the larger personnel community that they are an advocate and an agent for low-status students.

Freire's (1993a) notion of "critical consciousness" (*conscientizacao*) is relevant here, defined as the ability to perceive and interrogate the social, political, and economic forms of oppression that shape one's life and to take collective action against such elements of society (or social structure).  Thus, we have actors who assume the exceptional role of "empowerment

agent" and who strive to empower low-status youth with varied forms of institutional support,

and in doing so, are willing to disembed themselves from the reproductive practices of their

institution or environment, and to become a moral agent for positive change in the *world* that

both agent and youth inhabit (e.g., a university campus; see Lee, 2010). As discussed in detail

below, the emergence of 'empowerment social capital', when contrasted with the mere provision

of institutional support by institutional agents, entails an inherently radical agenda rooted in a

truly holistic conception of "empowerment" (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Lee, 2001).

Empowerment social capital, characterized by the provision of institutional support by critically

conscious institutional agents, comes with a socialization agenda aimed at transforming the

consciousness of those they support, and at encouraging them to also become moral and caring

agents devoted to *changing the world* (Ward, 2008).

It is important to realize, however, that other tacit or explicit ideological agendas may

motivate actors to assume the role of institutional agent. Void of 'critical consciousness,' adult

actors may become quite devoted to providing 'institutional support' to low-status youth as a

means of enabling them to uncritically assimilate into the *status quo.* There may even be some

consciousness of social structural forces within society (e.g., institutionalized racism) and within

their institution that function to problematize the success of low-status students, but the emphasis

is on "widening the pipeline" rather than on *changing the world.*

## Organizational Cultures Oriented Toward Counterstratification and Authentic Empowerment

The construction of interpersonal trust, solidarity, and shared meaning, as the basis for

authentically-supportive relationships between working-class minority adolescents and eligible

institutional agents, most consistently emerges in organizational contexts permeated by a culture

of empowerment, a culture existing amidst a larger context of stratification and exclusion.  The notion of empowerment has undergone the most conceptual refinement by scholars in the field of critical social work (Solomon, 1976; Sadan, 1997; Guterriez & Lewis, 1999; Lee, 2001).  Here, empowerment is defined as the active participatory process of gaining resources, competencies, and key forms of power necessary for gaining control over one's life and accomplishing important life goals (Maton & Salem, 1995).  Power is understood as the capability of persons carrying out their will, even in the face of obstacles, which may include other people and groups vying for the same resources. By definition, empowerment is a transitional and transformative process, from a state of little power and an existence framed by obstacles, forms of oppression, and blocked access to societal resources to a state where individuals and communities become socially engaged in ways where they strategically mobilize to access the resources and to exercise power so as to self-determine their very destiny.

Empowerment is both an ideological and sociological construct; fundamental to its constitution is the pursuit of social justice (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999).  It demands "equity, equality, and fairness in the distribution of societal resources (Flynn, 1994)" (cited in Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999).  To become empowered is to confront the rules of hierarchy and to envision a more democratic and humanistic social order.   Thus, in the context of empowerment theory, manifesting one's capacity as an *empowerment agent* is not only about enabling the authentic *empowerment* of the student or young person, but is also about participating with them in changing their world in some significant ways (Freire, 1973a, 1973b; Alschuler, 1980).

The processes of empowerment go far beyond the provision of institutional support, as important as this is in problem solving and in the achievement of developmental and academic goals.  Entailed are a series of empowerment experiences that lead to a *transformation of*

*consciousness* across key dimensions.  Institutional agents—as *empowerment agents*--enable low-status individuals to see a closer correspondence between their goals and a sense of how to achieve them, to develop an awareness of what resources are necessary and *how* to acquire them in order to gain greater mastery over their lives and destinies (Zimmerman, 1995, p. 583). However, this is only the beginning.  This transformation of consciousness fundamentally includes a sociological mindset—a "critical consciousness"--, a critical awareness about those societal structures, institutional policies and practices, and environmental conditions that *hinder* their efforts to achieve their goals (e.g., a successful transition from high school to college).  This sociological mindset entails proficiency in a discourse that interrogates those forms of oppression rooted in society, and manifested in deep structures that govern institutions such as the school (Fine, 1991; Lucas, 1999), school systems (Anyon, 1997), governmental bodies (Smith, 2001), and the juvenile justice system (Ianni, 1989). Such deep structures become understood not only in terms of how they play out in the influence of institutions and environments on childhood and adolescence (as a social constructions), but also in how deep structures, particularly within the school and community, are subject to substantive change through collective political engagement (Freire, 1973a, 1973b; Zimmerman, 1995; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Sadan, 1997).   Moving from institutional agent to *empowerment agent* requires enabling the young individual to *decode the system,* to momentarily disembed from the environment, engage in a critical moral dialogue with it, and to seek opportunities for working collaboratively to change the sociopolitical context (Mustakova-Possardt, 1999).

This sociological mindset also includes a discourse that illuminates the particularities of *counterstratification,* those '*power*-ful' mitigating processes (set into motion by the individual, by community groups, and by empowerment agents….) that help youth from historically-

oppressed communities gain immediate access to key resources, and also enable them to socially construct egocentric networks characterized by trusting relations with a constellation of institutional agents that provide authentic social and/or institutional support (see Stanton-Salazar, 2001, pp. 21-22; Whitten, 2007). Institutional agents—as "empowerment agents"--, however, are ideologically driven, motivated to not only provide authentic institutional support and to assist in altering the structure of youth networks (from bounded to 'cosmopolitan' (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000), all the while enhancing a developmentally-empowering sense of efficacy. Empowerment agents also facilitate a critical understanding of the sociopolitical context, including an ability to *decode* and interrogate the immediate institutional context and the larger social system.

'Decoding the system' entails multiple, simultaneous forms of enlightenment and action: an awareness of what resources and funds of knowledge are needed to achieve within the system at a precise moment in time, while envisioning a different social order, combined with understanding of what structures ultimately need to be dismantled. 'Decoding the system' entails knowing which actors and organizations in the social universe control key institutional resources, and which actors and organizations are the most predisposed and committed to the empowerment of low-status individuals and communities. 'Decoding the system' also entails the political and networking skill-set that enables young people from historically-oppressed communities to enter into resourceful relationships with these actors and organizations that *may not* have an empowerment agenda and any particular commitment to low-status youth or students. 'Decoding the system' entails a series of experiences that highlights the reality that people are able to accomplish meaningful goals through their access to resources *not* their own, and through receiving forms of institutional support either provided by agents who are motivated

to go against the oppressive practices of both institution and society or by actors that lack any empowerment agenda.  This is the essence of empowerment social capital.

Institutional agents—as *empowerment agents*—also facilitate and enable the development of key "coping strategies," articulated here in terms of the problem-solving capacities, help-seeking orientations, networking skills, and instrumental behaviors which are directed toward overcoming stressful institutional barriers and harmful ecological conditions (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; 2000; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).  Coping strategies are ultimately successful when barriers are overcome and the resources necessary to accomplish developmental and educational tasks and goals are acquired (Cochran, *et al.,* 1990).

In the sociopolitical and often oppressive worlds that low-status youth inhabit, authentic youth empowerment must go far beyond helping these youth successfully meet both the academic demands of the school system and the developmental challenges inherent in today's society.  It would certainly be a laudable goal to embed greater numbers of low-status youth within a system of *resource*-ful relationships and activities socially organized *via* a network of significant others, natural or informal mentors, pro-academic peers, and institutional agents distributed throughout the extended family, school, neighborhood, and community; but alone, such a goal leaves the world as it is. Institutional agents, as empowerment agents, not only fulfill a commitment to provide key resources to disenfranchised youth within their reach, they also engage them in collaborative networking to *change the world* (Alschuler, 1980; Freire 1973a; 1973b; Sadan, 1997). In the process, youth not only successfully reach key developmental goals and "overcome the odds," they also learn to collaborate with others, to exercise interpersonal influence, to act politically, to confront and contest oppressive institutional practices, to make tough decisions and work to solve community problems, to organize and perform complex

organizational tasks, and to assume democratic leadership.  In this perspective, authentic youth

empowerment can not be divorced from engagement in meaningful social change.

**Evaluating the Structure, Resources, and Resourcefulness of an Agent's Social Network**

The key idea in this article is that low-status youth are able to accomplish meaningful and

challenging goals through their access to resources *not* their own, and through forms of

institutional support provided by capable actors motivated to assume the role of empowerment

agent on their behalf. In turn, the capacity of such agents to empower youth and other agents

(who share their agenda) is dependent on three primary factors: first, on the resources these

agents directly possess and on the institutional support they are able to *directly* provide (i.e.,

*personal resources*); second, on the resources attached to their position (i.e., *positional*

*resources*); and third, on the resources and support possessed by other actors (or *alters*), but

whom agents are able to mobilize on behalf of the youth they are aiding and supporting. Their

capacity to provide this third and *indirect* yet effective form of support is dependent upon both

the *structure* and *quality* of their own social networks, and on forms of consciousness articulated

by the concept of "network orientation."  Below I focus on examining these last two important

variables.

First, effective institutional agents exhibit an enlightened "network orientation,"

beginning with a critical awareness that empowering another can be accomplished *indirectly,*

through actors and resources embedded in their own social networks.  An eligible agent's

network orientation can be characterized in terms of attitudes and beliefs that inform or motivate

the *personal initiatives* the agent takes in engaging various agents and in entering into personal

relationships with them (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; see also Cochran, *et al.,* 1990, Chapter 16).  A

positive or enlightened network orientation translates into initiatives to build a strong network of

support; it signals an awareness that networks can be a powerful problem-solving and resource system.  Embedded in such a system is a cadre of "consultants" and agents who can be called upon to assist with challenging issues--in the case here, how to effectively empower those that the primary agent cares about (Dulworth, 2008).  Such consultants are "people who have often faced similar problems, opportunities, and challenges" (Dulworth, 2008, p. 9).

Evaluating the structure and resourcefulness of an agent's own social network entails determining whether an agent's network is *diverse*—as opposed to homogeneous. Highly resourceful egocentric networks tend to be diverse and span organizational boundaries. Formally, network diversity is defined in terms of the extent to which network members have dissimilar attributes (gender, race, age, occupation, etc.).  Network *homogeneity* is the same measure, however with the emphasis on network alters more or less sharing the same social characteristics.

This is not to say that *size* of the agent's network doesn't matter, because it does; generally, the larger the agent's network, the better.  However, the beneficial aspects of size correlate with a network structure that is open or low-density, and moderately to highly diverse. Overall, the structure of a network matters more than its *size* (Baker, 2000, p. 45).

Another vital characteristic is whether an agent's network is *low-density* or *high-density*, open or closed—or using different terminology, *cosmopolitan* or *bounded* (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).  Network *density* is defined in terms of the extent that alters in the ego's network know one another.  Highly-dense networks (also defined in terms of *network closure*) are marked by frequent interactions, emotional investment and frequent reciprocity.  Such networks have been shown to be effective in providing certain kinds of social support (e.g., emotional support, instrumental support; Vaux, 1988) as well as in enforcing certain collectivist norms and

sanctions (Coleman, 1988; 1990). However, highly dense networks do not generate opportunities for establishing instrumental ties with alters in other networks; nor do they facilitate ego's access to new information diffusing throughout the greater social universe.

In contrast, open or low-density networks are expansive. As Wayne Baker (2000) puts it, "An alter's egocentric network is a gateway into the larger world" (p. 46). An agent's direct link with an alter can grant her access to the alter's egocentric network and to alter's social capital; "it may also give [the agent] access to a chain of links—an alter's alter's network, an alter's alter's alter's network, and so on" (Baker, 2000, p. 47).

Ronald Burt's (1992) work on "structural holes" strongly suggests that, in terms of evaluating networks within an organization, a balance between *brokerage* and *closure* is the ideal. A structural hole arises when 'actor *x'* participating in *Network A* reaches out to an actor in *Network B* and "bridges" or serves as a *broker* between networks (otherwise characterized by their closure). *The structural hole* is a feature of Network A, while actor *x* functions as a *bridge* between networks, and engages in the process of "brokerage." According to Lin (2001, p. 71), "bridges allow individual actors in one [network] to have access to resources embedded in nodes in another [network] that otherwise would not be accessible."

According to Burt (2009, p. 5), people who function as bridges "have a vision advantage in detecting and developing lucrative opportunities. Because network brokers (i.e., bridges) are more exposed to the diversity of these diverse opinions and practices, brokers have a vision advantage in selecting alternative ways to go, synthesizing new ways to go, and detecting likely supporters/opponents to implementing a proposed way to go. Thus, people who have strong relations to otherwise disconnected groups have a competitive advantage in detecting and developing rewarding opportunities."

In contrast, Lin (2001) would emphasize that people who function as bridges have an advantage in detecting institutional resources. Agents functioning as 'network bridges' are more exposed to other eligible or potential agents who control a diversity of resources and opportunities. Agents functioning as bridges have a vision advantage in terms of the various kinds of resources in the institutional universe, including schools and youth-serving organizations and the personnel that run such organizations (Quintanar, 2007). Such bridges are more likely to spot a variety of institutional domains that may maintain resources that may be of service to individual youth, to groups of youth, or to network colleagues that are trying to better serve a group of youth.

Translated to the activity of an institutional agent in the context of youth empowerment, agents who actively and regularly facilitate structural holes and function as bridges, gain advantageous access to resources embedded in other networks that they can use to either empower a youth, or to empower those agent-colleagues in their principal network who may be working on behalf of a group of youth. Being a *bridge* occupying a structural hole is not the only way to gain social capital. According to Lin (2001, p. 71), the closer eligible agents in the network are to a bridge, "the better the social capital to which they will have access." In light of the theorizations of Burt and Lin, the empowering potential of eligible institutional agents is synonymous with a *network orientation* that either strives for opportunities to serve as a *bridge* in a network, or strives to build close relations with those in the network that regularly function as bridges.

Michael Dulworth (2008) speaks to the importance of the "quality" of the network, referring essentially to the composition of an agent's network. Quality refers to people in the agent's network who themselves are experienced as 'institutional agents,'—that is, experienced

in empowering others with various forms of 'institutional support.' They possess high degrees of human and cultural capital; they hold positions of authority, and control valued resources. They exhibit 'cosmopolitan' networks, large in size, featuring a balance between participation in low-density supportive networks and high-density, highly diverse networks across organizational settings ("bridging social capital") (Putnam, 1993, for his distinction between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital). Quality also refers to the regularity in an agent's network of alters, who on behalf of the agent, take on the role of *advocate, knowledge agent, bridging agent,* and *institutional broker.*

## Conclusion

This article began with a focus on the important role that *nonfamily adults agents* play in the social development, socialization, formal and informal education, and social mobility of adolescents. Such attention defies the too often myopic focus on parental involvement, a focus that ignores the findings that middle-class parents do not operate alone, but are embedded in the social network of institutions, school personnel, institutional agents and youth-serving organizations in the community (Lareau, 2003; Ianni, 1989). It also ignores the findings that far too many parents and guardians in oppressed, segregated communities must raise children without these supports (Ianni, 1989; Williams & Kornblum, 1985; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

This article served a number of purposes, to highlight the role of institutional agents in the social reproduction of inequality, but foremost, to provide a framework that compels us to situate the exceptional experience of social mobility among low-status youth in a sociologically-sophisticated way. When low-status youth do *overcome the odds,* it is usually through interventions that embed them in a network of institutional agents connected to services,

organizations, and resources oriented toward their empowerment.  Interventions absent of rich

social capital and resource-generating networks regularly fail (Dryfoos, 1998; Kahne & Bailey,

1999).

A framework grounded in the concepts of concepts of *institutional support, institutional*

*agents*, *social capital* and *empowerment* is driven by several motives: to articulate that in the face

of society's investment in social inequality, efforts at youth intervention and authentic school

reform require a deep investment in sociologically-informed research and theory on both youth

alienation and youth empowerment; and to encourage intervention efforts to invest in a

sophisticated *theory of change* (Connell & Kubisch, 1999).  The sociological concepts

introduced this article each embody a set of complex processes; and complex problems deserve

complex yet doable analyses.  It is my belief that together, these concepts, used in a thoughtful

and integrated fashion, reveal their significant capacity to guide us in elaborating all of the

elements entailed in the notion of a "social support system," a system oriented toward the

complex processes of *empowerment* of low-status students and youths.

The article also introduced the concept of 'empowerment agents,' drawing from

empowerment theory in critical social work and from the work of Paulo Freire.  It's utility is not

so much in guiding research on existing institutional agents working in low-status communities

and schools, but in offering a model of youth engagement that inheres in the role of institutional

agent, though perhaps not so visibly.  Certainly, 'empowerment agents'—as described in this

chapter—do exist in the real world, but they are exceptions to the rule. The model of

*empowerment agents* presented here challenges us to go beyond liberal impulses to 'alter the

destinies' of individual youth, only so that they might 'make it' in the system, leaving the

system, however, largely intact--a new middle-class and a sector of the working class that are

perhaps more stable, more diverse, more liberal, but nonetheless, a citizenry now newly addicted to the fruits of societal inequality.  Empowerment agents, in contrast, not only understand the power of institutional support and social capital in the lives of youth and students from historically-oppressed communities; they carry a vision of a more just, humanistic, and democratic society, deeply committed to an enlightened and fair distribution of societal resources, and to dismantling the structures of class, racial, and gender oppression.   To *alter the destinies* of low-status students and youth, is not only to empower them with institutional support, but also to empower them with a critical consciousness and the means by which to transform themselves, their communities, and society as a whole.

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