

## Covert Racism and the Formation of Social Capital among a Volunteer Youth Corps

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### Abstract

In this ethnographic case study, I examine the race-ethnic and educational network patterns of association and subsequent social capital formation of 41 youth volunteers working for a national leadership program. Findings indicate that race-ethnic minority youth are more likely than white youth to cross race-ethnic and educational boundaries in their network (discussion partner) choices. White college-educated men report the highest levels of social capital benefits from their year-long program. White college-educated females, black high-school (and GED only) males, and white high-school males reported relatively lower levels of social capital formation and opportunities, with black males least satisfied with their experiences. The ethnographic data reveal how powerful racial identity is in the formation of social networks. The findings demonstrate the subtle ways in which covert racism continues to shape the reproduction of race-ethnic inequalities even in this civic organization that explicitly seeks to equalize opportunities.

### Keywords

covert racism, race-ethnic relations, racial identity, social capital, youth development

### Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, Robert Putnam released a groundbreaking book, titled *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Democracy*. In this book, Putnam makes the claim that social capital is declining in all areas of American society. By social capital, he means 'the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties' (Putnam 2000: 19). This includes 'features of social life such as networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to work together to more effectively pursue shared objectives' (Putnam 1995: 664–5). Putnam's conclusion was predicated on the notion that activities which used to be highly associational such as bowling have experienced

declining levels of participation. He concludes that this trend is occurring throughout every aspect of our society in spite of the contemporary rise in educational levels, which are generally positively associated with civic participation.

In the summer of 2007, Putnam expanded his research on social capital and examined the relationship between ethnic diversity and social capital (Putnam 2007). In 'E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century', Putnam argues that ethnic diversity tends to reduce social solidarity and social capital. He concludes that 'people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to 'hunker down' – that is to pull in like a turtle' (Putnam 2007: 149). In other words, ethnic diversity appears to undermine social capital because it causes people to trust less and to withdraw from collective life (Putnam 2007). As troubling as this claim might be, Putnam does offer a bit of optimism. He argues that we need to understand better the linkage between identity and social capital. Putnam concludes that 'the relationship between the two is almost certainly powerful and reciprocal: Whom you hang out with probably affects who you think you are, and who you think you are probably affects whom you hang out with.' (Putnam 2007: 159)

But, why does ethnic diversity tend to reduce social solidarity? And why does ethnic diversity appear to undermine social capital? What is it about ethnic diversity that causes people to trust less? Unfortunately, the findings presented in Putnam's work provide us with a limited understanding of the relationship between ethnic diversity and social capital. In this work, Putnam focuses more on the community as the unit of analysis and shows how the diversity of a community is linked to the average level of social capital in that neighborhood (Putnam 2007: 145). By his own admission, Putnam asserts that some tough research questions have been raised by his analysis that he has yet to provide answers for (Putnam 2007: 163).

One obvious contribution of Putnam's work is his acknowledgment that we need to examine more closely the relationship between institutions, identity and social capital. Putnam purports that we need to learn more about the many possible mechanisms that link diversity and hunkering (Putnam 2007: 163). He maintains that we need to examine whether diversity in the workplace or in church or in school have the same effects as the neighborhood diversity he examines in his study (Putnam 2007: 163). In other words, we need to know what kinds of social settings foster opportunities for meaningful interaction across ethnic lines.

Thus, in order to understand why ethnic diversity undermines social capital, we need to know something about how racial identity influences the networking patterns and the formation of relationships among participants from racially diverse backgrounds. For example, what impedes the development of healthy cross cultural interaction among individuals from diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds? What impacts the formation of these network-enhancing relationships? Under what conditions do these relationships develop? And how does one's racial identity impact this interactional process?

While Putnam's analysis provides us with limited answers to these important questions, there is one sociologist who does shed light on why ethnic diversity tends to undermine social capital. In 'Covert Racism in the USA and Globally', Rodney Coates provides us with a useful theoretical framework for understanding the linkage between racial identity and social capital. In this work, Coates illustrates how 'social and cultural institutions provide

the situational context through which systems of racialization are preserved, maintained, and perpetuated' (Coates 2008: 214). Coates argues that 'courts and police, schools and churches, friendship and family networks, and various media outlets – all serve to preserve, perpetuate, and/or modify racial attitudes, group formation and systems of racial oppression and exploitation (either implicitly or explicitly)' (2008: 214).

According to Coates, this dynamic process is carried out under the contours of covert racism. In his detailed analysis, Coates defines the contours of covert racism as: 'subtle, subversive, and deliberate informal and formal mechanisms that allow differential access to rewards, prestige, sanctions, status, and privileges based on racial hierarchies' (Coates 2008: 211–12). He argues that 'while covert racism does not carry the weight of law – tradition, norms, and customs typically uphold, justify, or obscure its operation. As a consequence, members of select racialized groups are "expected" to (out)perform selected tasks, develop specific skills and excel in certain environments – as compared to other racialized groups. Thus, covert racism serves to explain obvious racial outcomes as "natural"' (Coates 2008: 212). Coates continues by stating that 'covert racism refers to those subtle and subversive institutional or societal practices, policies, and norms utilized to mask structural racial apparatus. Thereby masked, this racial apparatus serves to restrict, deny, or otherwise distort the opportunities available to the racialized non-elite' (Coates 2008: 212).

In this article, I seek to examine how racial identity influences the way participants form network ties. Using individuals as the unit of analysis, this ethnographic case study illuminates how race takes on meaning in the context of power relations. More specifically, this article will demonstrate how race structures individuals' relationships, identities, and opportunities. Most people think of racism only at the individual level; however, racism shapes people's minds, as well as their interactions with others, and the opportunity structures in which groups find themselves (see Johnson et al. 2000). In fact, the way people are perceived within a system of hierarchy and power is central to understanding the relationship between identity and social capital. We know that power is not equally distributed in our society. We also know that power is often linked to the distribution of resources. In most social environments, individuals with the greatest amount of power also have the greatest access to resources and opportunities.

## The Organizational Setting

This is an ethnographic case study of Ray of Light (RL),<sup>1</sup> a national youth leadership development program located in a major metropolitan area in the northeastern USA. In this case study, I will illustrate how covert racism operates within the context of this particular social setting in ways that hindered the access of social capital for some individuals while enhancing access for others. This case study will show why some participants in this program were more successful than others in building relationships that transcended racial hierarchies. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how these networks of relationships were instrumental in helping these participants cultivate critical social resources that enhanced their lives in meaningful ways.

The mission and objectives of this organization make it a very attractive model for assessing the development of social capital among a diverse group of young people.<sup>2</sup> By social capital, I mean the resources for interpersonal growth gained through accessing network relationships or social ties with other people. Social capital is different from cultural capital in that it relates to the opportunity structures that ties people to resources through a network of embedded social relationships. Such social relationships are shaped by power, social inequality, and the informal dynamics of trust.

In contrast, cultural capital includes those internalized attributes related to a person's education and experiences, for example, knowledge, language, demeanor, attitudes, desires and aspirations. The acquisition of cultural capital is primarily supported through economic resources or social class privilege. Although cultural capital is very important to achievement and upward mobility, in this discussion, I am interested in how young people with diverse social backgrounds (and by implication, cultural capital) build *social capital* in this volunteer program. In what follows, I will examine and describe the processes involved in the formation of social capital for young adults from diverse racial-ethnic and educational backgrounds. I will show how issues of power and inequality, or what may be understood as covert racism, can impact access to social networks and to resources and opportunities within an organization that explicitly seeks to equalize opportunities.

Most theories of social reproduction argue that social capital functions to reinforce or maintain racial and social inequalities from one generation to the next, primarily through the dynamics of social class (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; MacLeod 1995; Portes 1998, 2000). This is largely due to the fact that society rewards the social and cultural attributes of those in higher economic classes by providing resources and opportunities to this already privileged group. This is particularly true in a society such as the USA where racism and sexism are both institutionalized and covert and work effectively as barriers to the acquisition of social resources such as education, jobs, and leadership opportunities. In fact, research confirms that there is often a two-way relationship between social capital and human capital (Haley and Cote 2001). The evidence suggests that human and social capital may be mutually reinforcing (Haley and Cote 2001).<sup>3</sup> Although one's acquisition of human capital may enhance their individually possessed knowledge and skills, alongside individual skills, however, social relationships are also important to human achievement. Networks of trust and cooperation can help individuals realize their human potential. Thus, social networks can promote the education of individuals and this education can promote social capital.

However, few theories or research specifically address social capital formation for a diverse population of youth (for some exceptions, see Kahne and Bailey 1999; McGuire 2000). Indeed, existing theories cause one to question whether marginalized groups, minorities, and disadvantaged youth develop social capital at all. However, based on my own experience as an African American female who was able to gain the social capital that enabled me to attain a high-quality education, I am interested in understanding how theories of social capital can be applied to the experiences of youth from highly diverse backgrounds.

Volunteer Ray of Light members address critical community issues through innovative partnerships with corporations, the public school system, and a range of community-based

organizations, making up a virtual circle of partners who serve to strengthen the civic fabric of the city. Ray of Light engages corporations, their employees, and private citizens in a wide range of community initiatives, often led directly by corps members. For example, social programs deliver curricula that focus on literacy, diversity, domestic violence, community service, and environmental justice. In addition to uniting people from diverse racial, educational, and class backgrounds, Ray of Light is a model of both public and private partnerships that bridges the non-profit, public and private sectors. In exchange for their dedicating a year of their lives to full-time service, corps members receive an educational award of \$4725 for 1700 hours of service. They are also provided with a uniform, cell phone, a modest weekly stipend, student loan forbearance, and basic health insurance. Volunteers are taught leadership skills and have access to over 9000 alumni for future career development and network opportunities. Ray of Light participants must be between the ages of 17 and 24, US citizens or permanent residents, have a high school education or its equivalent, or commit to securing a General Educational Development (GED) qualification during their year of service. Each corps member is assigned to a team of 8–12 members during their service. Team members are selected to represent different racial, socio-economic, and educational backgrounds as well as different talents and skills. Ray of Light service projects typically fall into five categories: School Partnerships, After-School and Out-Of-School Programs, Youth Leadership Corps, Volunteer Engagement, and Physical Service. A program manager who is a Ray of Light full-time paid staff member leads each team. During the year of this research there were 123 corps members serving in the Northeast Chapter: 58 percent whites, 33 percent blacks, and 9 percent other ethnicities (7% Latinos and 2% Asian Americans). Females comprised 52 percent and males 48 percent of all corps members. GED participants made up 20 percent of the group and high school graduates 46 percent; participants with some college comprised 14 percent and college graduates 20 percent.

### Theoretical Perspectives on Social Capital

The origin of social capital theory began with French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and American sociologist James Coleman (1988, 1990). Although Bourdieu has been credited with offering the most theoretically refined analysis of the concept, critics argue that for Bourdieu, social capital is one of several ways of maintaining and reproducing the dominant class (Lin 2001; Morrow 1999). Few dispute that social capital plays a fundamental role in the reproduction of social inequality. However, Bourdieu's theory fails to provide an explanation for how individuals from diverse social backgrounds, who vary in their degree of economic and cultural resources, can acquire valued social resources through participation in a network or group. For Coleman, social capital is not lodged in individuals although it can be used to facilitate the production of individual or collective ends. Social capital is formed within relationships built on trust, information-sharing, norms, effective sanctions, authority relations, and in-group obligations (Coleman 1990). Coleman's statement that social capital is any 'social structural resource' generating returns

for an individual in a specific action suggests that social capital is indistinguishable from its outcome. In other words, for Coleman, social capital is identified when and if it works.

Although both of these theoretical approaches provide important insights into the workings of social capital, for the purpose of this research, I adopt Lin's conceptualization of social capital as the resources embedded in social networks that can be accessed and used by individuals for actions (2001). Social networks are 'groups of people brought together by common interests, experiences, goals, or tasks; this implies regular communication and bonds characterized by some degree of trust and altruism' (Cohen and Prusak 2001: 56). This definition distinguishes between the actual resources and the social interactions that facilitate action. As with Coleman, social capital is viewed as a structural resource as opposed to an individual attribute. Capital is seen as a social asset by virtue of an individual's connections and access to resources in the network or group to which he or she belongs (Lin 2001). Thus, 'resources' in this sense are defined as the social resources accessed through an individual's social connections and relationships (Lin 2001). Viewing social networks in this light, it is easy to see how network membership can foster a sense of connection, trust, and understanding among its members. It also becomes clear that building networks of relationships can help individuals to cultivate critical social resources that enhance their lives in meaningful ways. In this work, I will examine how individuals acquire social capital in relation to their race/ethnicity, gender, and educational backgrounds in order to illuminate the underlying dynamics of social inequality that shape network formation.

## Methodology

The research design for this work is qualitative, utilizing in-depth interviews and participant observation. The value of participant observation is that it allows the field worker to understand things about others by interacting with them. By conducting in-depth interviews, I was able to introduce an element of triangulation into my work (Schensul et al. 1999). During the data collection period, September 2001 through May 2002, I was a National Service Fellow with the Corporation for National Service. This role afforded me full access to the RL corps and provided me with office space and equipment. My role inside the organization allowed me the opportunity to participate in activities and to interview the participants for this project. My participant observation was also used as a strategy to build trust with interviewees and to establish credibility in the organization. Consequently, when I approached corps members about participating in the study, I found most of them accommodating and eager to participate. By conducting interviews, I was able to ascertain how a participant came to select and develop relationships with network members in this social setting. I was able to ascertain how being a participant from an advantaged or disadvantaged social background status (race, gender, class, education) and role or status in the organization could influence the types of social contacts made. Moreover, I was able to ascertain what types of resources the individual was able to access through these social contacts.

### *Data Collection*

In-depth interviews with participants were conducted over two time periods during the participant's service year, at the beginning following an initial orientation and training (October 2001), and after the volunteer had worked with the organization for several months (March 2002). I conducted all of the interviews using a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide. My lines of inquiry included soliciting:

- 1) perceptions of opportunity in the organization,
- 2) perceptions of social support,
- 3) social contacts made,
- 4) social resources accessed through these social contacts,
- 5) training and leadership development opportunities, and
- 6) educational and professional goals.

The data presented in the Tables below originated from the Discussion Partner Questionnaire asked of each participant. In Phase Two of the data collection, each participant was asked the following question: 'From time to time, most people discuss important matters with other people; looking back over these months, since you joined Ray of Light, who are the people, other than the people living in your household, with whom you discuss matters that are important to you?' Subsequently, I recorded information on the first three individuals (or as many as) the participants named. These discussion partners were taken then to constitute the individual's network. Participants were asked about the race, gender, education, relationship (neighbor, relative, friend, other) and employment status or organizational role of the people named. The participants' answers were then reduced to categories indicating:

- 1) the demographic characteristics of the discussion partners,
- 2) if the discussion partner was a member of the service organization or from the community, and
- 3) if the organizational status of the network member represented a vertical or horizontal relationship. Vertical relationships include those persons in higher ranking positions (RL Program Managers or heads of community organizations), whereas horizontal relationships are with persons holding similar level positions, such as peer-volunteers working on other teams.

### *Sampling*

Using a quota sample, I purposively selected participants from across the 10 RL service teams to obtain diversity in race, gender, and education. However, because some racial and ethnic groups had a larger representation in certain educational categories, the sample does not reflect all possible groupings of race-education categories. For example, there

were no black male college graduates. The final sample included 41 individuals: 18 whites (44%), 17 blacks (41%), four Latinos (10%), and two Asian Americans (5%). Due to the small numbers, the latter two groups are identified in the Tables as 'other'. The educational composition of the sample included: six GED participants (15%), 17 high school graduates (41%), seven participants who attended but did not graduate from college (17%), and 11 college graduates (27%).

## Findings

### *Race and Organizational Status of Network Members*

Table 1 below presents the participants who identified network members and the race/ethnicity and organizational status (team participant, institutional agent, or community member) of the network member (discussion partner) they selected. The network formation patterns suggest that a participant's race matters in their selection of network members, as does the race and social status of the network members selected as discussion partners. Looking at columns in Table 1, black participants made the majority of contacts with institutional agents, both black and white. Only black participants display a pattern of making equal numbers of contacts with both black and white network members at each of the status levels. These overall trends suggest that black participants moved outside their racial world and developed relationships with network members that transcended racial

Table 1 Race/ethnicity of participants by organizational status of network member

Race/Ethnicity of Network Members	Race/Ethnicity of Participant							
	Black		White		Other		Totals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Team Participant								
Black	8	18.6	3	6.7	2	11.1	13	12.3
White	8	18.6	13	28.9	3	16.7	24	22.6
Other	–	–	2	4.4	2	11.1	4	3.8
Institutional Agent								
Black	10	23.3	4	8.9	3	16.7	17	16.0
White	11	25.6	14	31.1	5	27.8	30	28.3
Other	2	4.7	1	2.2	2	11.1	5	4.7
Community Member								
Black	2	4.7	1	2.2	–	–	3	2.8
White	2	4.7	5	11.1	1	5.6	8	7.5
Other	–	–	2	4.4	–	–	2	1.9
Network Choices	43	100.0	45	100.0	18	100.0	106	100.0
Participants	17	41.5	18	44.0	6	14.6	41	100.0

Table 2 Race/ethnicity of participants by race/ethnicity of network members

Race/Ethnicity of Participant	Race/ Ethnicity of Network Members						Total Choices	
	Black		White		Other			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Black	20	46.5	21	48.8	2	4.7	43	40.5
White	8	17.8	32	71.1	5	11.1	45	42.5
Other	5	27.8	9	50.0	4	22.2	18	17.0

boundaries. White participants were much less likely than their black counterparts to bridge racial boundaries. In fact, white participants had the most racially homogeneous networks of any group, with over 70 percent of contacts made with other white discussion partners. When a white participant did select a black network member, they were more likely to select a black institutional agent as opposed to a team participant or a community member. White participants made few equal-status contacts with black, Latino or Asian team participants (6.7% and 4.4%). Overall, other groups (Latino and Asian participants) made discussion partner contact about equally between white network members and racial and ethnic minority network members including their own group.

However, the greater number of social ties with network member discussion partners was made with institutional agents, and these ties were more prevalent with white institutional agents. Among peers, Latino and Asian participants made about equal status contacts with both black and white team members as well as members of their own group. Similar to their black counterparts, the Latino and Asian participants were successful in developing relationships that transcended racial boundaries. Table 2 consolidates the data to show the matrix of selection: race/ethnicity of participant and race/ethnicity of discussion partner, apart from status. Reading across rows, it is readily apparent that blacks' choices were the most evenly divided between black and white network members while whites by a large majority selected other whites. Moreover, Latinos and Asians divided their network selections rather evenly between whites and minorities, including their own group.

### *Education and Peer Network Ties*

Table 3 compares the education levels of participants with those of their discussion partners who were peer volunteers. Not every participant named a RL person as a network member and some participants named more than one RL participant as a network member. Reading across the rows gives the selection pattern of participants. Those from both lower status and higher status educational groups were likely to select a network member discussion-partner who shared a similar educational status. For instance, both GED and high-school graduates most frequently named as discussion partners other network members who were high-school graduates. All peers named by the GED participants as discussion partners were high-school graduates.

Table 3 Race/ethnicity of participants by educational level of peer network choices

Education Level of Participants	Educational Level of Network Peer Choices									
	GED		High School		Some College		College		Total Choices	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
GED	—	—	6	100.0	—	—	—	—	6	10.7
High School	3	11.1	11	40.7	5	18.5	8	29.6	27	48.2
Some College	—	—	4	57.1	2	28.6	1	14.3	7	12.5
College	—	—	2	12.5	8	50.0	6	37.5	16	28.6

Among the high school graduates, the most frequent choice for peer discussion partner was another high-school graduate. Among all the educational groups, high-school graduates had the most educationally diverse networks, selecting at least one network member from each education category although just under half of their selections were college graduates or those who had attended college. Interestingly, high school graduates were the only educational group to select a GED participant as a network member. Even GED participants failed to select another GED participant as a network member opting instead for high-school graduates. The participants who attended but did not graduate college also selected the majority of their discussion partners from among high-school graduates. The participants from the highest status educational group made the majority of their contacts with network members who were college graduates or who had attended college. The vast majority of peer discussion partners selected by college graduates had attended or graduated from college. The college graduate participants made the least number of contacts with high-school graduates as network members, only two.

### *Education and Race in Peer Network Ties*

Table 4 shows the educational levels of peer network discussion partners named by participants classified by their race/ethnicity. The network formation patterns (across rows) suggest that both race and education are important in a participant's selection of network members. Black participants were the only group to name GED peers as discussion partners. They also named partners from three of the four education groups.

The discussion partners named by whites from among their peers were predominantly those who had attended or graduated from college. Unlike race, the gender of the participant was not a significant factor in the overall educational composition of networks. The participants from racial minority groups formed networks with mostly lower status educational group members. White participants, however, formed networks with mostly higher status educational group members. In fact, white participants had more college graduate network members than any other racial group. Although the majority of their

Table 4 Race/ethnicity of participants by education level of network peer choices

Race/Ethnicity of Participants	Educational Level of Network Peer Choices									
	GED		High School		Some College		College		Total Choices	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Black	2	13.3	9	60.0	—	—	4	26.7	15	100.0
White	—	—	7	36.8	3	15.8	9	47.4	19	100.0
Other	—	—	3	50.0	2	33.3	1	16.7	6	100.0

contacts were with lower status educational group members, black, Latino and Asian participants also formed some network relationships with higher status educational group members. These data suggest that these participants were more likely than their white counterparts to develop relationships that bridged both racial and educational boundaries.

As is evident in Table 3, the network formation patterns for educational groups suggest that participants developed relationships with network members from their same-status educational group or from one level higher or lower as opposed to bridging relationships with network members that represented more diverse educational boundaries. Table 4 suggests that participants from minority groups made more contacts with lower status (no college) educational group members than white participants. The interview data illustrate the ways in which these network patterns of relationships among each race/ethnic and educational group shaped the social capital development of the youth volunteers. These data also provide some insights into how unequal status and power dynamics likely shape the relational dynamics among network members which in turn shape access to valuable social capital resources.

### Network Relations and Social Capital

Of all the participants in the study, white college-graduate males walked away with the majority of the resources. Since all of the male college graduates were white, there was limited competition for resources in this high-status group. Male privilege, white privilege, and their 'status' as college graduates combined to enable these participants to garner the most power and influence in the RL environment. The ethnographic data reveal that all three of the white male college graduates obtained valuable leadership and professional development skills, marketable employment skills, and each secured a job position at the conclusion of their program year. Sam is representative of these white male participants.

I've already applied for the teaching fellow position at Citizen Schools... So, that's what I will be doing after I graduate... I found out about the position through Latrina, a

teaching fellow at my site... I'm really impressed with her. I just really want to be a part of what she does, I guess, because she knows all the students, she knows all their parents... I really just believe in what Citizen Schools provides and what they're trying to accomplish. And it's important for me to believe in the organization that I work with. (Sam, white male, college graduate)

All of the white males were successful in integrating their college majors into their service partnerships that, in turn, facilitated meaningful relationships with vertical contacts. Inside the organization, these males were also successful in establishing meaningful connections with institutional agents. Each one articulated how institutional agents frequently sought them out for leadership opportunities. Ryan is a good example.

There's this project coming up. I believe it's going to be survey work that has to do with the programs... We're going to, I hope, try to get to the bottom of exactly what's wrong with the programs and try to fix them. It's like evaluations and surveys and we have to, you know, input it all, so we can see exactly where the problems are... We'll probably interview kids and all that stuff... My program manager just told me about it. I know a little bit about it; I took a couple of methods courses and everything, so it kind of ties into that, and I think they're using the same software that I'm used to. So she wanted me to help out. (Ryan, white male, college graduate)

It seems that vertical contacts both inside and outside the organization significantly enhanced the white males' access to social capital resources. This was not the case, however, for the white female college graduates all of whom expressed disappointment and frustration about the lack of leadership opportunities available to them. Stacie illuminates this frustration in her comments.

I was a site manager... for Kids Camp both in the winter and spring. But I think that as much as they say you have a leadership position, you have to go through so many levels of people that you really don't have a leadership position... I think, as a corps member, in every aspect of leadership I've been given, I've never felt true ownership, because there's always someone, like a PM – and I just don't feel like – they're going to give you ownership... There's an interesting dynamic between the older corps members and the PMs. Sometimes you feel really patronized here and as if you're not capable because you're just a corps member. (Stacie, white female, college graduate)

Overall, college-educated white females did not perceive their volunteer experience as positive or beneficial. However, black female college graduates articulated a very different perception of the opportunity structure and their access to resources. Listen to how enthusiastic Tara was about the leadership opportunities she was afforded.

That's the one thing that Ray of Light has given me; they've put me out there so many times to just be myself and express why I came here and who I am as a person and what

led me to this point in my life. And I've had numerous leadership opportunities... I did the Youth Conference... I did an interview with [Northeast] College Radio on the day of servathon. I was on television twice with interviews. I was interviewed with the *Globe* and the *Herald*. There's another newspaper that I was interviewed for. I did other speeches too. Oh! I did the speech at Ray of Light opening day. (Tara, black female, college graduate)

As a group, black female college graduates were more successful than their white female counterparts in accessing social capital resources.

White female college graduates and white female high school graduates experienced the greatest difficulty developing horizontal (peer) contacts with socially dissimilar others. Based on these data, white females prioritized peer relationships with other white females with whom they shared background and educational characteristics. Black females, by contrast, prioritized mostly vertical relationships with black institutional agents. Both black female college and high school graduates developed meaningful contacts with black institutional agents, facilitating access to important resources and opportunities. In addition, black females expressed a stronger desire than their white female counterparts to develop peer relationships with socially dissimilar others. Ethnographic data from the black and white female high school graduates also reinforce the importance that staff support plays in helping participants from lower status educational groups access social capital. Black female high school graduates were more successful than their white female counterparts in accessing resources and opportunities, largely because of the connections they made with institutional agents. Black females expressed how these connections helped them overcome personal obstacles and gave them the confidence to pursue leadership opportunities. In the quote below, Tiffany talks about how the support she received from staff members provided her with the confidence to pursue a key leadership position at the organization, a camp manager position.

I have a lot of staff in my corner backing me up on a lot of things that I want to do... During the last two days of winter camps, I did such a good job; I kind of took over the camp. I kind of ran it the way I wanted to run it... and then [two white program managers] said that I should be a site manager for spring camps... I realized that was something that I could do; that's a job that I could handle. (Tiffany, black female, high school graduate)

As with the white female college graduates, white female high school graduates also affiliated primarily with similar peer contacts – other white female high school graduates. This may partially account for why they reported more limited leadership or professional development opportunities. Brittany explains her reasoning behind the decision not to invest more time in pursuing leadership opportunities.

It's just kind of like this is what I do during the day... I'm going to be honest. I definitely feel like I spend a lot of time here and that any other time is my time, you know? So I don't tend to take on leadership opportunities because I want to go and do what I need to do. (Brittany, white female, high school graduate)

Data on females who attended, but did not graduate from college also demonstrate the importance of staff support for securing community opportunities. This group of participants formed relationships with institutional agents, as well as socially dissimilar peers. The ethnographic data reveal that the success of these participants in accessing social capital was due largely to their network formation patterns. In the quote below, Haley describes the role she played in keeping her team mate, Yolanda, 'engaged' in the program. Yolanda, a black female GED student, was on the verge of being terminated from the program because of her lack of commitment and poor attendance. In the quote below, Haley shares how her program manager gave her credit for Yolanda's remaining in the program.

That's something I've worked on a lot this year, is delegating responsibilities and kind of coaching people along. One of my favorite things where I've done that is leading Yolanda, who is a very angry 23-year-old, who's had a really crappy life. We're pretty much best friends. I mean, just today, I was talking with my PM, and she's like, 'You're pretty much 50 percent of why she's still here.' Just being a leader in trying to keep people engaged in what we're doing... It's about bettering ourselves and keeping people engaged, and not necessarily happy, but at least focused, you know? This is one of my main leadership goals. (Haley, white female, some college)

Haley commented further on the profound impact that developing relationships with socially dissimilar others had on her social development.

So just by the nature of the fact we're put on the same team or made service partners in shelters, like Walter and I. I would have never had met Walter, an 18-year-old male who dropped out of high school, got his GED last summer, and is going to community college next year... I'm saying that in the reality of the world... he would have passed me as another black male. It's not the skin color; it's his personal experience, obviously... So just putting us together, making him my service partner... making Yolanda my teaching partner during the day... There would have been no connection, ever, between us, and maybe now I will seek out these kinds of people... (Haley, white female, some college)

Some male participants who attended college but did not graduate also developed leadership and organizational skills that helped them further their educational and career aspirations. In the quote below, Derrick recognizes that he has learned important organizational skills and that this experience has taught him to work better with people who have different work styles and personalities.

I actually do have a lot of experience writing and reading but I think this team requires a lot of planning, which is good, because I'm not that great at planning, but I do have a lot of good ideas. So it's been very good for me to help organize a lot of the ideas I have. It really does let me express my skills in designing worksheets or talking and writing... I think one thing I've learned since joining Ray of Light is that anybody can work

together... I've seen people with completely opposite attitudes or work ethics getting together and eventually just getting it done because once everybody sees what the goal is, then it doesn't really matter so much that everybody has different styles of getting along. (Derrick, black male, some college)

The white male high school graduates articulated a different perception of their opportunities than both the white and black males with some college or college graduates. For these participants, their 'privilege' as white males did not appear to enhance access to resources or opportunities. Illustrating the inequalities in status among men, these participants felt that they were denied opportunities because of their age, educational status, and being suburban white males. This perception seemed to hinder their ability to establish meaningful relationships with institutional agents. They did not feel supported by staff members and as a result did not seek to foster relationships with them. Brian illuminates this issue.

It seems to me... the 18-year-old white males are really overlooked... Ray of Light really wants the kids from the inner city to step up and take leadership roles. Everything is aimed at them to take leadership roles. And if that doesn't happen, they drop it on the college grads, who they know can do it. And then I'm in the middle... because I'm white and from the suburbs, I'm not here to be a changed person... So, I'm not expected to step up. Because they want the kids who have had rough lives; they're using Ray of Light like a stepping stone for life. They want them to step up and take positions. And then when it doesn't happen... it's thrown to the college grads... I mean the opportunities haven't really been there for me or anybody in my age bracket or status really. (Brian, white male, high school graduate)

Similarly illustrating social hierarchies that exist among men, some of the black male volunteers felt unsupported by staff members in their pursuit of leadership opportunities. Black male high school and GED participants expressed how difficult it was to develop trust inside the organization and to find support among staff members. No doubt, the organization's inability to retain staff members of color had a detrimental impact on black males from the lower status educational groups. Henry talks about this.

I don't feel encouraged or supported by staff here. And I don't know. I don't know if it's that I don't put my best into it, or I'm not really connected... I've often felt like I was kind of wasting my time because, like I said, I don't like to put my thoughts out there if it's not going to be utilized. And there was a point when [a Latino male program manager who resigned at the beginning of the year] was here; he's the one that encouraged me to fill out the application for the camp position. And after that, when he was gone, I felt like there was no more support, at least supporting me. I mean, like if I don't go to them, they won't support me. They don't come up to me, and say like, 'How are you doing? What's going on today? Do you need help with this or do you need help with that?' (Henry, black male, high school graduate)

Issues related to differences in power and social inequalities were most pronounced among black male participants. In fact, black males from the lower status educational groups had the greatest difficulty establishing meaningful connections to team mates as well as staff inside the organization, a significant barrier to their accessing social capital. As one black male GED participant put it, 'It frustrates me sometimes because some people, like college grads and stuff... people that are more well-educated than me, like they try you in class, like to bring you down. And that makes me less motivated being here.' This black male went on to say that he tried to talk to staff people about this challenge because he did not want to quit the program, but 'nobody [was] trying to work towards providing help... [nobody was] trying to help [me] complete the year.'

Latino males did not feel the opportunity structure was limiting for them as minority males or as high-school graduates. In fact, this group of male participants provided positive sentiments regarding the support and encouragement they received from staff. Charlie's perspective was typical.

Now, I know that I want to go study education. Before, I was trying to get into media stuff, like radio, television, and trying to find something there... But now, I have gotten so many opportunities like just planning a curriculum, like working on a team, getting service for people, planning a leadership development day, being able to even participate in service. Like, not a lot of people have had an opportunity to do stuff like that. And also just the organizational skills that Ray of Light brings... It has made me more computer literate. And it has educated me on a lot of different things and made me think more about having gotten a chance to be a teacher to kids. It's gotten me to think more about education, the importance of it, and it has changed my career path. (Charlie, Latino male, high school graduate)

Latino males like Charlie were able to identify a career path and to develop specific skill sets they could use to help with their future employment. Moreover, the Latino male high-school graduates were generally more successful than white and black male high-school graduates in developing meaningful relationships with institutional agents, significantly enhancing the quality of resources they were able to access.

### **Covert Racism and Social Capital**

The findings presented in this work shed light on how interpersonal relations and social context affect access to and accumulation of social capital for individuals from both privileged and marginalized social positions in our society. These data provide insight into how network memberships and patterns of association helped some individuals to foster a sense of connection, trust, and shared understandings and prevented others from doing so. One way of conceptualizing the subtle dimensions of covert racism is to understand that the types of relationships we foster, whether consciously or unconsciously, have consequences for ourselves and for others. In this volunteer organization, race/ethnicity significantly

influenced the social composition of a participant's network. Individuals from both privileged and marginalized social positions were found to experience difficulty in bridging the racial and social class gap between themselves and others. However, this pattern was much more pronounced among whites than racial and ethnic minorities. A growing body of research concludes that a substantial majority of whites have no sustained equal-status contacts with blacks, especially in informal settings (see Feagin and O'Brien 2003). This work illustrates once again the tendency of people toward affinity grouping, particularly among whites. Even in the context of an organization that is programmed to integrate young people from diverse racial/ethnic, geographic, and social class backgrounds, the tendency to find the comfort zone of one's own kind is very evident. The choices that people make, based on their background experiences and attitudes, tend to represent a kind of covert racism that works effectively to reproduce the racial/ethnic-class and gendered hierarchy of our society. Likewise, the social attributes that participants brought into the Ray of Light organization – their education, their race, their gender – to a large extent determined what they took from it. Among male participants in this research, there are striking examples of reproduction theory at work. White, college educated males claimed the greatest social capital, followed by Latino males, and with African American males either not finishing the program or gaining relatively fewer social capital resources when they did. Black males entered the organization as a marginalized group, but the organization designed to provide them with upward mobility offered few black male role models and seemingly presented them with few opportunities for leadership and with many obstacles to success. This is covert racism at work on all levels, societal, organizational, and small-group.

The picture for female volunteers in this organization is more complex and will be examined in more detail in future writings. No doubt the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender operate to complicate the experiences of women both in relation to other women and in relation to male hierarchies (Collins 2000). Among women, differential education, a proxy for class differences, seemed less important as an affinity grouping filter than did race and social status in the organization. White women tended to select other white women peers as their primary confidants, yet they did not easily cross vertical boundaries. While they did report positive experiences in gaining greater appreciation for diversity, they were much less positive about their leadership opportunities. Many of these women felt that staff members did not really allow them to own responsibility in their assignments, and that they were not fully respected as leaders. White women likely perceived that they were losing opportunities both to black college-educated women and white college-educated men. These women tended to find social support among other women who were likely to share their own backgrounds and perceptions. The quotes by both Brittany and Stacey (see above) indicate that white women were less engaged and had a greater sense of 'biding time' until the volunteer stint was completed. This perspective was echoed by white high-school educated males who perceived leadership opportunities lost to college-educated males and to minorities targeted by the mission of the organization. The college-educated male group (all white) was given opportunities to 'rescue' programs because of their perceived competence in difficult

assignments. Black college-educated females, by contrast, felt supported and engaged in their experience, apparently because staff found in them a group that they could 'successfully launch' into the community. No doubt the success of women like Tara provided the organization with a record of success among minorities.

In this opportunity-enhancing organization, all the participants were of equal status as network members on their respective teams. However, race, class, and gender dynamics did impact which groups formed social networks comprised of higher status network members and which groups were denied access to these social networks. White females from the highest educational category and black males from the lowest educational category experienced the greatest difficulty in developing relationships that crossed racial, gender, and social status boundaries, thus reinforcing the notion that there are no true egalitarian organizations in our society. These data suggest that even organizations such as Ray of Light, designed and funded for the purpose of enhancing opportunities and eradicating social inequalities can function as a system of covert or institutionalized racism and sexism.

Clearly the group that encountered the greatest difficulty generating social capital inside this environment was black males. When we contrast the experiences of these black males with black and white females in the same educational group, it is clear that black males were marginalized because of their race, gender, and educational status. In part black males were hindered from accessing social capital because of the organization's inability to retain minority male staff persons. Sadly, in the case of Henry (see quote above), his lack of connectivity to staff support led him to doubt himself. Despite the fact that black males desired to establish meaningful contacts with institutional agents who could provide them with resources and opportunities, they struggled to bridge the racial and educational gap that separated them from supportive ties. However, without ties to advocates with whom they could identify, they were left on their own to negotiate the challenges encountered. In addition to lacking staff support, black males perceived that they were subjected to racial, gender, and educational stereotypes by their socially dissimilar team mates.

Interview data reinforced the importance of staff members in providing emotional support and in connecting corps members to resources and opportunities within the organization and in the outside community. For some social and demographic groups, human bridges were a vital and missing link in their accessing social capital. What is particularly troubling about these findings of covert racism is that this is a program designed to enhance the social mobility opportunities for marginalized individuals. In fact, this program receives federal support because of its ability to attract and recruit a diverse corps of young adults. However, as an organizational model, Ray of Light is not unlike other organizations in reproducing social inequalities through unconscious and unintentional patterns of association. Most of the decision-making power lies in the hands of a few select individuals in senior management positions. Not coincidentally, the majority of these decision-makers are highly educated white males. Thus, as Coates's work illustrates, Ray of Light as an organization provided the situational context through which systems of racialization were preserved, maintained, and perpetuated (see Coates 2008).

## Conclusion

Not surprisingly, power is not equally distributed inside the Ray of Light environment. But it is difficult for those with power and privilege to understand the dynamics of how inequality issues impact the experiences of those who are less powerful. There is no question that Ray of Light is creating positive developmental experiences for many of the corps members and, indeed, many of these experiences are reflected in the interview data. However, many times members of racially or ethnically subordinate groups are placed in conspicuous positions just to make an organization look good; sometimes they are hired or recruited as 'tokens' or 'window dressing' (see Feagin and Feagin 2003). Unfortunately this may have been the case at Ray of Light for both minority male staff persons as well as the black male participants from the lower status educational groups. The weeding out of both is clearly a demonstration of covert racism and ultimately leads to the reproduction of inequality.

Although rhetorical ideals of civic participation, diversity, and calls for racial blindness permeate Ray of Light, the rhetoric simultaneously obscures the reality of the subtle, subversive, and often hidden forms of racism that are perpetuated in its practices. The organization projects the idealism of opportunity in the context of diversity and equality. However, rarely do they include the voices of marginalized groups in their decision making. Training program managers and staff to be more aware of participants' diverse experiences can strengthen the organization in meeting its goals to provide genuine developmental opportunities to all of the groups it serves. Some program managers were far more skilled than others in helping participants negotiate barriers to opportunities and at fostering good community relations. Effective program managers did more than provide leadership for their team; they also served as important institutional agents linking participants to resources and opportunities in the environment.

There are important lessons to be gleaned from research on the hidden aspects of racism in organizations such as Ray of Light. In particular, most of us are not conscious that our daily actions in forming interpersonal relationships have important consequences both for ourselves and for those we include or exclude. Although the mechanisms of social capital formation are similar for all groups, the ways in which access to social networks and resources are distributed in society are not. We can effect change when we openly choose to select and support our dissimilar peers and change the subtle and often unconscious patterns of affinity associations. Likewise, those in positions of power can effect change by conscious avoidance of the often subtle and hidden practices of exclusion. Only by exposing these practices and increasing awareness of covert racism will we become change agents for a more egalitarian society.

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## Notes

- 1 Ray of Light is a pseudonym for an organization funded and supported by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNS) established in 1993. CNS is an independent federal agency created to administer most of the major federally funded domestic and volunteer community service programs.
- 2 Ray of Light was founded on the belief that young people can change the world. The mission of the organization is to give corps members the skills and opportunities to serve in diverse communities across the USA. The organization seeks to build stronger communities, break down social barriers, develop young leaders and foster active citizenship.
- 3 For a detailed discussion of the relationship between human capital and social capital see Ivan Light's work on mutual metamorphosis. In Light's analysis he argues that 'possibly the most important part of capital's various forms is mutual metamorphosis. Metamorphosis means that the forms of capital change into one another and back again over time. Physical and financial capital metamorphose into one another. In the same sense, social, human, and cultural capital metamorphose into one another and into financial and physical capital.' (Light 2004)

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