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**Black Youth Activism and the Role of Critical Social Capital in Black Community Organizations**

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# Black Youth Activism and the Role of Critical Social Capital in Black Community Organizations

Shawn A. Ginwright
*San Francisco State University, California*

This article argues for a nuanced understanding of how Black youth respond, resist, and work to transform school and community conditions. It posits that community-based organizations in Black communities provide Black youth with critical social capital, which consists of intergenerational ties that cultivate expectations and opportunities for Black youth to engage in community change activities. Data for this study were collected from 3 years (October 2000–December 2003) of participant observation and interviews of 15 Black youth who were members of Leadership Excellence, a small community-based organization in Oakland, California. This study demonstrates how critical social capital is facilitated by challenging negative concepts about Black youth in public policy, cultivated by strengthening racial and cultural identity among Black youth, and sustained through ties with adult community members who help youth frame personal struggles as political issues.

*Keywords:* *African American youth; Black youth; youth activism; urban communities; social capital; agency; civic engagement; community organization; critical social capital*

In their classic 1962 study of Black Chicago, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1993) commented about the relationship between neighborhood decline and the emergence of a perception of "wild children" (p. 589) in Bronzeville. They commented that

> Bronzeville's "wild children" were not so numerous as the frightened upper and middle class thought, but there were enough of them roaming the streets during the Depression, stealing, fighting, and molesting pedestrians, to cause everyone—including lower-class parents—to talk about the "youth problem."

Today, talk about the "Black youth problem" in public policy circles and the general public has shaped ethnographic research in Black communities. In recent years, social science research about Black youth has almost entirely focused on

**Author's Note:** Please address correspondence to Shawn A. Ginwright, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 91432; e-mail: shawng@sfsu.edu.

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understanding various causes of problem behavior, such as violence, school failure, substance abuse, and crime (Anderson, 1990, 1999; Anyon, 1997; Noguera, 1995; Wilson, 1987). Although an understanding of these social problems is indeed important, the narrow focus on problems obscures the complex ways in which Black youth respond, challenge, and change conditions in their schools and communities.[1]

In this article, I argue for a nuanced understanding of how Black youth respond, resist, and work to transform school and community conditions. Rather than conceptualize Black youth behavior as maladaptive responses to social and economic conditions (Wilson, 1996), I argue that Black youth respond to community and school conditions through forms of civic engagement overlooked by social scientists. Building on Akom's discussion (2003) of Black community organization and borrowing from Sampson and colleagues' notion of community social capital (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999), I suggest that community-based organizations in Black communities provide Black youth with critical social capital—connections to small community-based organizations in Black communities that foster political consciousness and prepare Black youth to address issues in their communities.

Formulations of social capital are broadly defined as "features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1993, p. 36). That is, as people extend their relationships with others, institutions, and groups, they are more likely to have greater access to resources such as jobs, educational opportunities, and neighborhood safety (Fuchs, Shapiro, & Minnite, 2001; Portes, 1998). Critical social capital departs from traditional notions of social capital by placing a greater focus on the collective dimensions of community change, and it centers on how racial identity and political awareness serve as an important community and social resource for youth. Critical social capital is facilitated by intergenerational advocacy that challenges negative concepts about Black youth; it is developed by building a collective racial and cultural identity; and it is sustained by cultivating an understanding of personal challenges as political issues.

This article is a result of participant observation data collected from 1999 to 2003 of 15 African American youth who participated in a community-based organization in Oakland, California. Through interviews, focus groups, and observations, I demonstrate how critical social capital is developed, sustained, and translated to struggles for justice for Black youth in low-income communities.

This study is guided by the following questions: First, how is critical social capital developed and sustained among Black youth in urban communities? Second, how do community-based organizations function as sites of critical social capital in the context of community change activities?

# Black Civil Society and
# Fostering Critical Social Capital

The idea of civil society as facilitated through civic organizations is central to an understanding of social capital and democratic participation. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* outlined the role that civic organizations play in achieving democratic participation. For de Tocqueville, volunteer associations provided social ties, mutual trust, and key political lessons required for a healthy democratic society. Voluntary associations such as churches, social clubs, and civic organizations have always played a major role in the organization of Black social and political life. Speaking about Black social life in his landmark study of Philadelphia, W. E. B. Du Bois (1899/1996) astutely noted,

> The Negro churches were the birthplace of Negro schools and of all agencies which seek to promote the intelligence of the masses; and even today no agency serves to disseminate news or information so quickly and effectively among Negros as the church. . . . Consequently, all movements for social betterment are apt to center in the churches. Beneficial societies in endless numbers are formed here; secret societies keep in touch; co-operative and building associations have lately sprung up; the minister often acts as an employment agent; . . . so far reaching are these functions of the church that its organization is almost political. (pp. 201-207)

Du Bois described the unique and ubiquitous ways that social capital functioned in Black community churches. Building mutual trust among community members, disseminating information, and simply functioning as a central social hub, the Black church has served political, social, and religious functions. As such, Cohen and Dawson (1993) noted,

> African American social institutions and networks are critical elements in providing an information nexus through which African American perceptions of racial group interests are framed. . . . It is through these networks that the intergenerational transmission of African American political values, mores, and beliefs occurs. (p. 290)

However, Black communities have dramatically changed since 1899. Crack cocaine, caste-like poverty, and lack of state intervention to address these problems have shaped the reality of Black life. Some have argued that the state, which once provided basic social services, has failed to address these issues in Black communities (Wacquant, 1998). In response to the state's neglect of facilitating basic social welfare, some community organizations serve as a buffer to mitigate what Wacquant (2001) refers to as the penal state—the omnipresent influence of state institutions, such as police, schools, and prisons, that in concert encroach upon urban life through surveillance, zero-tolerance policies, and imprisonment, in the name of public safety. Rather than build mutual trust, democratic participation, and community building,

the penal state, according to Wacquant, threatens the vitality of social networks in Black communities. Scholars have argued that growing poverty, crime, and violence, as well as the state's diminishing role in providing basic social services, have resulted in new forms of social capital in urban Black neighborhoods (Dance, 2002). These new forms are exemplified through local dance crews, networks of hip-hop artists and producers, and connections to grassroots community organizations.

Although scholars have observed these new forms of social capital in Black communities, their observations have been undertheorized. For example, Chang (2005) chronicles how New York City's economic decline and layoffs in the public schools in the 1970s created limited extracurricular opportunities for Black and Latino youth in the Bronx. In response to years of gross disinvestment in New York's low-income communities, youth formed networks of break-dance clubs, DJ crews, and neighborhood hip-hop block parties that encouraged youth from neighborhoods that were once at war with each other to come together and compete through dancing or rapping. This coalition ultimately served to mitigate violence in the Bronx, and it provided limited economic opportunities for local hip-hop artists.

Sullivan (1997) argued that in the absence of traditional participatory opportunities, such as student government, community review boards, and youth volunteering, some Black youth participate in an intricate network of relationships between hip-hop artists, party promoters, filmmakers, and youthful hip-hop clubs that provide Black youth with tangible organizing skills. More recently, Kitwana (2002) discussed how the proliferation of new hip-hop political organizations, such as Hip-Hop Summit Action Network and the National Hip-Hop Political Convention in 2004, sought to garner the resources and energy of the hip-hop generation to build a common political a platform relevant to the needs of millions of disenfranchised youth and young adults. These forms of social capital are a new paradigm by which to conceptualize social organization among Black youth in urban America. However, despite the breadth of evidence that social capital in Black communities is taking new forms, our theoretical understanding of the forms that social capital actually takes is thin. We understand very little, for example, about what constitutes social capital among Black youth in urban communities and how social capital is developed and sustained.

Akom (2003) provides one of the few theoretical treatments of these new forms of social capital in Black communities. In his ethnography of educational achievement among Black youth in a Philadelphia high school, Akom illustrates how the Nation of Islam serves as a key mediator of social capital among Black youth. He illustrates how Black youth members of the Nation of Islam develop Black achievement ideology where academic success supports their notions of what it means to be Black. Through the theological foundations of the Nation of Islam—as well as the organization's deep, consistent engagement in community issues, such as its community policing, academic tutoring, and serving as role models for neighborhood youth—Akom provides a timely and eloquent analysis of key mediating factors of social capital in Black communities.

Community organizations such as the Nation of Islam play a significant role in mediating social capital among Black youth in urban communities. Akom's discussion (2003) of the Nation of Islam illustrates how community-based organizations develop and sustain new forms of social capital for Black youth in urban communities. For youth who grapple with joblessness, crime, and violence, social capital is developed and sustained through community organizations that support youth by confronting social and community problems. This form of social capital is closely linked to Sampson et al.'s discussion (1999) of collective efficacy: "Collective efficacy for children is produced by the shared beliefs of a collectivity in its conjoint capability for action. The notion of collective efficacy emphasizes residents' sense of active engagement" (p. 635). Sampson et al.'s view of social capital acknowledges structural constraints in communities, and it views youth as active participants facilitating neighborhood change through strong social networks. Community institutions such as schools, churches, and youth programs that are located in Black communities are key in developing and sustaining critical social capital for Black youth and their communities. Rather than view social capital as perfunctory relationships and connections to resources, critical social capital in Black poor communities must contend with fostering a critical consciousness, building a strong racial identity, and developing political optimism and expectations about community change.

## Method

Data for this study (see Table 1) were collected from 3 years (October 2000–December 2003) of participant observation and interviews of 15 Black youth who were members of Leadership Excellence (LE), a small community-based organization in Oakland, California. LE's mission is to educate Black youth for personal and social change. The organization's philosophy rests on the premise that community change occurs through personal transformation. By receiving support with personal issues such as police abuse, shame for substance-abusing parents, and anger for not having a father in their lives, Black youth build their capacity to challenge community and social inequality. The organization was created by a group of Black college students in 1989 and has earned respect among Black residents in Oakland for working with Black children and youth (ages 6 to 18) from juvenile halls, probation, schools, churches, and other community organizations. Located in the downtown corridor that is home to over 20 youth organizations in the city, LE staff, board of directors, and youth are all African American.

My observations occurred largely during the organization's summer activities, such as summer camps, and during their weekly Saturday morning political education meetings. My observations extended into their schools, local shopping centers and, occasionally, their homes. I kept extensive field notes in several notebooks that were reviewed and analyzed for themes, interesting patterns, and unanticipated

**Table 1**
**Data and Sources of Evidence**

| Type of Data | Quantity and Content |
| --- | --- |
| Youth interviews | 15 transcribed interviews ranging from 1 hour to 2 hours |
| Community interviews | 17 transcribed interviews ranging from 1 hour to 3 hours |
| Field notes | 8 transcribed meetings ranging from 2 to 5 hours |
| Program evaluations | October 2000 to December 2003: 3 documents, 5 pages each |
| Grant proposals and reports | 3 proposals, 10 pages each; 2 annual report memos about Leadership Excellence programs, 4 pages each |
| Various reports | 14 reports ranging from 40 to 100 pages (regarding economic trends, demographic information about Blacks in Oakland, etc.) |

surprises. There were generally two types of observations—one, a description of what I had witnessed and, two, details of what I found interesting and surprising. These notes were coded for theme and analysis using techniques developed by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995).

In addition to conducting interviews with youth, I interviewed 5 parents and 12 adult program organizers in Oakland about LE. Many of the interviews were conducted at the youth center, but occasionally the interviews occurred in their homes and at their schools. These interviews were generally 1 hour and were largely unstructured in that they allowed me to probe a variety of subjects. I also analyzed organizational documents, such as the LE's strategic plan and program evaluations.

During my participation and observations in many of the meetings, discussions, and summer programs, I was not a distant, objective observer. In fact, I was instrumental in founding the organization and designing many of its programs. For over 10 years, I served as the executive director of LE and was consequently familiar with many of the youth and their families. Additionally, I have developed relationships with a number of community residents, Oakland Unified School District officials, and youth service providers in the San Francisco Bay Area. As such, I was able to easily develop relationships with these youth because I knew some of them from my prior role as executive director. In qualitative research, I would certainly be considered an insider. I have lived and worked in Oakland for 10 years, which has given me a distinct advantage with regard to knowing the lay of the land. Consequently, I was well aware of the major changes occurring in Oakland during the time of my research.

This ethnography is shaped by these experiences, as well as from numerous informal conversations with youth and community residents about life in Oakland. During this period, I discussed with these youth some of their concerns related to life in Oakland. Nearly every young person with whom I spoke had in some way lost a friend or classmate to violence. Despite this tragedy, these young people expressed an intense need to heal from the pain they experienced from their losses. LE was one place where youth could go to talk, kick back, and learn about the causes of the issues

they faced in the community. Youth said that they were often tricked into learning something because they had so much fun talking about different issues. The activities at the center were made to be entertaining and educational by integrating aspects of Black urban youth culture, such as hip-hop music, videos, and older young adults who could effectively use the local vernacular and thus connect street ideas to sociological concepts.

Through rich ethnographic examples, this article demonstrates that critical social capital is developed and sustained among Black youth in three ways. First, it challenges negative preconceptions of Black youth as civic problems by conceptualizing them as important political actors in their communities. Second, it fosters a collective racial and cultural identity. Third, it helps young people understand the political explanations for their personal challenges.

# Results

## The Background of Activism in Oakland

Oakland has a rich tradition of political activism. The Black Panther Party—being the most prominent example—provided Black youth with not only political education but also rich connectedness to community members, families, churches, and events. In fact, the Black Panther Party served as the backdrop to political life for some Black youth in Oakland. One LE youth participant commented,

> My mom got me interested in the Black Panthers at an early age because Huey Newton and my mom's brothers used to hang out and get drunk. They used to come through our grandma's house and my grandma would cook for everybody. My folks knew Huey Newton but not for political stuff but just on the social level. The Panthers used to just come around on the block and eat and talk to my grandma. She didn't know what the Black Panthers really stood for. My mom was more involved with the political stuff—that's how I got aware of politics and stuff going on with Black people.

There were few distinctions between political life and social life in Oakland's Black community during the 1960s liberations movements. These social and political networks continue to serve as rich sources of cultural memory of Black political life in Oakland. This cultural memory, however, does not emerge in a vacuum; rather, it is facilitated through informal intergenerational conversations and networks that build trust, skills, and optimism about changing problems in people's everyday lives. These conversations occur in community-based organizations.

Ongoing battles between the police and Black youth in Oakland have fostered a culture of distrust and suspicion between both parties. For years, Black youth have voiced concern about the mistreatment they receive from the police (MacDonald, 2004). These allegations of misconduct on the part of the Oakland Police Department

are not unfounded. In fact, in 2002, several members of the Oakland Police Department were formally charged with willful misconduct and were removed from their posts (Lee, 2004). These tensions contribute to wide distrust of police and the justice system on the part of Black youth. David, a 16-year-old LE participant, commented about a negative encounter with the police that reinforced his distrust of police officers:

> We were coming from a basketball game at Saint Joe's High School. After the game, we were driving on East 14th, and the police stopped us and told us that they thought we were buying coke [cocaine] or something. So the task force car rushed in to check us out. The problem was, we didn't have anything on us, and there was nothing in the car. They illegally searched the car and did not find anything, because we weren't doing anything wrong. We told the officers that we knew our rights and we knew that they did not have the right to check our car. The officer must have not expected us to talk about our rights, so he handcuffed us and slammed us on the hot hood of the police car that they had been driving around all day. It was so hot it was burning our face!

Stories of police harassment are common among Black youth in Oakland. LE found itself at the epicenter of virulent battles between the police and Oakland's Black youth. The organization actively contested the "predatory" image of Black youth and recast an image of Black youth as important community actors. It is precisely LE's ability

> to cultivate and sustain what Melucci [1989] called "submerged networks" of everyday political life where actors produce and practice alternative frameworks of meaning, social relations, and collective identity below the horizon of established or officially recognized institutions. (Gregory, 1998, p. 135)

## Contesting Perceptions of Black Youth in Oakland

In March 2003, the chief of police, the mayor, and the local congresswoman convened a town hall meeting to learn about the community's experience with police misconduct. LE's executive director was asked to attend the meeting to represent Oakland's youth. Upon arriving at the meeting, she realized that no young people had been invited, and she believed that it was important for the officials to hear from youth themselves. Using her cell phone, the director called several LE participants and asked them to come to city hall and tell the city representatives what was happening with Black youth in Oakland.

> When I got to the meeting, it was the usual cast of characters, the mayor, Congresswoman Barbara Lee, and the chief of police. We were there to talk about youth, but there were no youth at the table. So I called a few youth who were hanging out at the LE center and asked them to come and represent and speak their mind to these so-called leaders. When they arrived, they got on the open mic and blew everyone away.

When Ricky, a 17-year-old LE participant, approached the microphone, everyone immediately focused on how he was dressed. His baggy jeans, oversized "hoody" sweatshirt, tennis shoes, and shoulder-length locks seemed to typify the urban uniform for young Black males in Oakland. Despite the fact that this style of dress is common among urban youth, Black young males who dress in this way are labeled thugs and troublemakers by the police and are targeted for surveillance and searches. Ricky commented about his experience with the police:

> I just want to be real with y'all. When I am out there, I feel like a target for the police. People see me and look at the way I dress and treat me less than a man, less than human! I feel like a target for self-destruction! Sometimes I feel like giving up—fuck it! But I am a wise person—you cannot judge me by the way I look, because I know what wisdom is inside me and I just need the opportunity for you to see me for who I am.

By providing meaningful opportunities to give voice to Black youth and articulate their feelings about the police, LE challenged the problem-driven discourse about Black youth in public policy and recast Black youth as key civic partners in community change efforts. Equally important was the mutual trust that was developed between the adult director and Ricky. Because LE created a space for Black youth to be heard and recast Black youth as political actors, Ricky pushed himself to live up to the positive political expectation that LE staff held of him.

> [LE adults] see stuff that you don't see in yourself, and they try to bring it out of you. They see me as an activist or something, and I'm not political like that. But when [the current LE executive director] lets me speak my mind to folks like the mayor and political people, it makes you want to live up to that image, you know.

This contract was created between LE youth and adults through mutual trust and reciprocity. That is, the adults expected Black youth to engage in political affairs, and in turn, Black youth conceptualized civic and community change as a responsibility. By creating forums and by participating in campaigns for youth funding and other civic activities, LE challenged the idea that all Black youth in Oakland were threats to neighborhood safety. Critical social capital was created and sustained through opportunities where Black youth were viewed as legitimate political actors. The expectation that LE adults held about Black youth reconstituted images of Black youth from civic problems to civic problem solvers.

Critical social capital, however, does not simply involve acting out mutual expectations. Rather, it involves creating a collective racial and cultural identity among Black youth that provides them with a unified understanding of their plight in American society. This is important given the entrenched ways in which Black youth in urban communities have been socialized to view each other through fragmented, adversarial neighborhood identities (such as East Oakland versus West Oakland). LE's strategy to create a unified racial identity among Black youth provided a way for youth to develop identities that mitigated neighborhood turf conflicts.

## Creating a Collective Racial and
## Cultural Identity Among Black Youth

One important aspect of how LE created and sustained critical social capital among Black youth involved its ability to foster a sense of common struggle among youth and adults. Slogans such as "One life, one love, one people," "I am because we are," and "I am my brother's/sister's keeper" were commonly found in newsletters and on T-shirts that reinforced the idea of collective struggle. LE adults said that one purpose of the organization was to provide Black youth with a "knowledge of self" so that they could be better equipped to address social and community issues. By creating a collective Black youth identity that was connected to politically charged issues in Oakland, Black youth developed politicized racial identities. Gregory (1998) noted that collective identities are "formed and reformed through struggles in which the 'winning of identification,' the articulation of collective needs, interests, and commitments is itself a key stake in the exercise of domination and resistance" (p. 18).

On Saturday mornings and Wednesday afternoons, LE held workshops and activities about pressing issues related to Black youth. Through group discussions and political education activities, youth developed a political understanding about juvenile justice, racism, and poverty and how these social issues shape their lives and communities. Through these sessions, LE youth learned how to discuss the causes of problems in their communities, and they strategized about how issues could be addressed. One activity involved participants' sharing with partners pleasant childhood memories and memories that were painful. After sharing with each other intensely personal stories, these youth began to connect their similar struggles and experiences, which ultimately resulted in a newfound racial unity. Malik, a 19-year-old participant, commented about this experience:

> I realized that we are dealing with some of the same stuff—not having our fathers around, seeing our mothers work three and four jobs, and having seen your best friend get smoked. I never knew that we were all dealing with some of the same stuff. We are from different turfs in here [LE youth center], and out on the streets we would never even speak to each other because I'm from West Oakland and he might be from the East, and that's enough to keep us from connecting because the East and West are enemies. We might even be shooting at each other if we were in the streets. But here we get to see a different side of each other. We get to see the deeper stuff that's goin' with all of us.

Activities that encourage youth to reflect on their common experiences are key to building critical social capital among youth. However, fostering cultural pride and strong racial identities was also embedded into the LE culture. For example, youth frequently used the term *nigga* upon greeting each other in the center. The adults, though respecting Black youth argot and style, encouraged youth to reflect on a prior workshop experience that was designed to reveal the history and legacy of the

derogatory term. An activity called the Middle Passage provided youth with a reenactment of the African enslavement and the transatlantic slave trade. Over an intense 2-hour blindfolded reenactment of the Atlantic slave trade—complete with sound effects, props, music, and narration—youth were taken through a powerful progression of how the term *nigga* was used first by slave traders; next, slave masters; then, Southern Whites during the 1950s and 1960s; and, finally, urban Black youth today. The intensity of the workshop allowed the participants to experience, rather than simply understand, the pain and struggle that came with the term. This awareness of a common racial experience and the sociopolitical understanding of the term *nigga* cultivated a racial awareness that was relevant to their daily lives. Commenting on his experience of the Middle Passage activity, Malik said,

> Before I came here [LE], I didn't know what the term *nigga* meant, and I didn't really care. I would say, "What's up, nigga!" "What you doin' nigga?" I had no idea of what the term meant or where it came from. I didn't know how our ancestors felt when the White man called us *nigger*. I thought about it differently after this activity—how it must have felt to be treated like we were dogs, like we were animals, to be tied up and pulled around in the dark. It hurts to know that our people have experienced this. But you don't realize this until you experience something like this activity, even for just an hour. I learned that we call each other that word without knowing the price Black folks paid.

Malik's awareness of the historical legacy of the term *nigga* shaped his understanding of racial unity while politicizing his understanding of Black youth oppression. Activities such as these encourage youth to make connections between historical racial oppression and present-day racial issues. For example, some youth made explicit connections between the violence experienced by Africans through slavery and present-day violence in urban communities. This collective racial identity provides youth with a broad political consciousness about social issues. Additionally, it fosters a sense of collective responsibility and purpose to create a higher quality of life for themselves and their communities.

## Understanding Personal
## Challenges as Political Issues

LE's capacity to build and sustain collective racial identity and collective interests among Black youth is an important aspect of critical social capital because it allows youth to understand how intensely personal struggles are shaped by broad political issues. The well-known adage from the women's rights movement—"the personal is political"—exemplifies how LE cultivates an understanding among Black youth that personal issues have political explanations. LE borrows from Paulo Freire's notion of critical consciousness (1993), which suggests that when people critically reflect on the conditions that create their suffering, they can collectively mobilize to change such conditions. LE views critical consciousness as a necessary

precursor to collective action and so encourages youth to reflect on the political explanations of personal issues.

In fact, LE intentionally obscures the boundary between personal and political dimensions of daily life and encourages Black youth to make connections between individual problems, such as finding a good-paying job, and broader political issues, such as low wages in California. Lateefa, a 16-year-old mother and LE participant, illustrated this point. Upon learning that she was pregnant, she went to sign up for free child care at her school, which allowed mothers to complete school without having to drop out to care for their children.

> I had my baby in March, and the school had a program that provided child care so that I could still go to school and graduate. When I went to sign up for the free child care program, they told me that the child care center would not be open, because there were not enough girls signed up. Now this leaves me without child care, and I cannot go to summer school. I don't have anybody to watch my child—I don't have any money to pay for child care, which is $135 a week! I don't have that kind of money. I told them, "What do you expect me to do?" I'm not going to be one of those African American teen-mother statistics, you know, I am going to graduate from high school.

Lateefa's political consciousness encouraged her to conceptualize the closure of the center as a denial of her and other pregnant students' right to access to education. By challenging the district's decision to close the center, she conceptualized the closure as dismissing Black pregnant girls as statistics who were not interested in graduating anyway. During an LE meeting, Lateefa explained her situation to us:

> I told the people at the district that I'm gonna try my hardest to get this day care open, and if I don't get this day care open, I will find people who help me and assist me to open the day care for summer school for teen parents. You know, this situation is harder for me to deal with because I'm young—you adults are out of school, you have jobs, you have a family. I haven't reached that point yet; I'm still trying to get out of high school. How can you stop someone who is trying to improve, you know?

Lateefa shared her personal challenge (being pregnant) with other youth in the context of a larger political discussion about Black youth issues in Oakland. During the discussion, other youth shared stories about how their rights were denied by other public institutions. Lateefa's political consciousness shaped her understanding of the closure of the school as a political issue rather than a personal problem. As opposed to discussing how she should have avoided getting pregnant, she explained how she organized other teen mothers and forced the district to keep the child care center open:

> They said that there were not enough girls to keep the center open, but I know that all my friends who have children would go to school if they could get child care. So I just

called them and told them that they could graduate and get free child care. We had a meeting at my house, about 12 of us. I knew the superintendent of the district was coming to my school. The next week, I told my friends that we were going to confront the superintendent so that he would keep the child care center open. How is he going to support education but won't let us graduate? So the next week when he came into the school with all the press and cameras, me and all my friends met him at the front door with all our crying children. I handed him Kiya [her baby] and said, "If you don't reopen this center, then maybe you can watch our children when we go to school and get an education." Well, the next day, I was informed that the district was going to keep the center open.

Lateefa's sense of collective and individual efficacy reframed her personal issue from a powerless Black and pregnant teen statistic to an active community member with the capacity to challenge the school district to meet her needs as a new mother. Ultimately, as a result of the center's reopening, Lateefa graduated from high school and, through working with LE staff, was admitted to San Jose State University.

Critical social capital for Lateefa involved more than skills and knowledge about how to organize; more important, it fostered a consciousness about her capacity to change circumstances that she viewed as being unjust. Lateefa's activities challenged the prevailing discourse about Black youth in Oakland as civic problems and repositioned Black youth as legitimate political actors within the broader Black community. LE served as a key forum where Lateefa could reframe an identity as a Black teen parent and articulate a clear understanding of her collective rights as a student.

## Discussion

In recent years, social science research about Black youth has almost entirely focused on understanding various causes of problem behavior, such as violence, school failure, substance abuse, and crime. Bound by the social disintegration thesis, researchers have undertheorized how new forms of social capital facilitate youth activism and community change among African American youth. This study repositions an understanding of Black youth behavior by presenting a nuanced understanding of how social capital facilitates political development and civic engagement among Black youth. Rather than focus on how urban decay and poverty foster delinquent and pathological behavior among Black youth, this article illustrates how critical social capital—connections to small community-based organizations in Black communities—prepared Black youth to address issues in their communities. Borrowing from Sampson and colleagues' notion of community social capital (1999), I argue that critical social capital is embedded in neighborhood-based networks of collective interests, collective identities, mutual trust, and people's shared capacity to act on behalf of the common good.

I also argue that critical social capital consists of intergenerational ties that cultivate expectations about the capacity for Black youth to transform the conditions that shape their lives. For Black youth, critical social capital is facilitated by challenging negative concepts about Black youth in public policy, developed by building racial solidarity, and sustained through political consciousness about personal issues. By examining how community organizations cultivate a collective racial and political identity, we can develop a deep understanding of the intersection of social capital and collective action among Black youth. More important, such an analysis reveals important prosocial dimensions of Black youth behavior.

This study explicates the unique properties of how to develop and sustain critical social capital in Black community organizations. LE provides three important strategies of how critical social capital can facilitate activism among African American youth.

First, by reframing the discourse and negative perceptions of Black youth as civic problems, LE views Black youth as important civic problem solvers. This key conceptual shift allows youth—who typically have little say in addressing policies that shape their daily lives—to voice their ideas and opinions about the issues that matter. Youth voice concerns about police misconduct, safety in schools, and the availability of recreational activities. These opportunities create mutual expectations between youth and adults where youth are expected to engage in political affairs once adults create opportunities and space for them to do so. LE's view of Black youth as important political actors is a key mediating factor in developing and sustaining critical social capital. Second, creating cultural pride and a strong racial identity strengthens critical social capital for youth who have turf-based identities that are antagonistic with those of other neighborhoods. LE encourages youth to make connections based on the premise that all people of African descent experienced and continue to experience racial oppression. This common experience serves as a common ground to build collective consciousness and solidarity among youth. Third, LE cultivates critical social capital by helping youth reframe personal issues (e.g., being 16 and pregnant) as political issues (e.g., being denied the right to graduate from school).

Through this critical social capital framework, we can understand how social ties, intergenerational relationships, and connections to organizations support Black youth in conceptualizing their daily struggles. From this perspective, police brutality, academic failure, and unemployment are viewed not as individual shortcomings but as institutional strategies and policies that have a direct impact on youth's lives.

An understanding of critical social capital yields a set of outcomes that allows us to move past individual and restrictive notions of youth development and toward a broad vision of the collective dimensions of civic engagement and the youth development process. There remain, however, several undertheorized properties of critical social capital in Black community organizations. For example, little is known about how organizations such as churches sustain optimism, hope, and a positive outlook on the future in the midst of violence and despair. Research in this area has

illustrated that critical social capital and activism can foster *cognitive liberation* (McAdam, 1982)—collective optimism about the capacity of groups to change social and neighborhood conditions. More recently, scholars have examined the role of activism and civic engagement in fostering well-being among youth in poor urban communities (Youniss & Hart, 2005). Future research in this area should extend and build on the idea that relationships, ties to community, and contributing to the common good facilitate emotional well-being. This is particularly important among Black youth who live in highly neglected communities, experience violence, and express little or no hope that they can acquire a better quality of life. Thus, critical social capital moves beyond trust, connections to institutions, and relationships to illuminate the contours of how hope, faith, and optimism serve as the ties that bind us together.

# Note

1. Kelley (1997) relates this point to the study of Black communities. He argues that ethnographic work in Black communities has reinforced the notion that there is a Black monolithic community, and he continues to have a fascination with studying pathology among the Black urban poor.

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**Shawn A. Ginwright** is an associate professor of education in the Africana Studies Department and senior research associate for the Cesar Chavez Institute for Public Policy at San Francisco State University. His research examines the ways in which youth in urban communities navigate through the constraints of poverty and struggle to create equality and justice in their schools and communities. He is the author of *Black in School: Afrocentric Reform, Black Youth, and the Promise of Hip-Hop Culture* and coeditor of *Beyond Resistance! Youth Resistance and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth*. He has published extensively on issues related to urban youth in journals such as *Social Problems*, *Social Justice*, *Urban Review*, and *New Directions in Youth Development*.