

# The Power of Social Capital: Lessons from an Accidental Friendship between a Catholic Parish and Local Neighborhood Children

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## **Abstract**

Social justice is often thought of as means of creating systematic change through large scale methods. This reflective narrative about a group of children in the Forest Park Southeast Neighborhood of St. Louis and their relationship to the adults and children of St. Cronan's Parish examines social justice from smaller, more personal context as it relates to increasing social capital. Pierre Bourdieu's (1972) understanding of the interplay of personal agency and social structure provides a theoretical framework for discussing the larger possibility that individuals in many different types of community organizations, including churches and schools, can help marginalized individuals increase social capital. Moreover, this paper provide a positive, non-religious framework for any individual to bridge the gap between individual beliefs and values, particularly faith based beliefs related to social justice, and the expectation for non-faith based behavior *and* positive action in some secular settings.

## **Meet Demetrius\***

Demetrius is a nine year old third grader who lives in a small apartment with his father and brothers. He has attended a different city public school each of the past three years. Demetrius tries in school but his attention issues often get in the way. He is slightly overweight and always hungry, since the nutritional value of the food purchased from the local convenience store is lacking. Demetrius and his friends walk the streets in search of something to do besides watch the television. They often try to hang out at the local community center but the hours are confusing and many activities require parent permission or a small fee, both are difficult for Demetrius to obtain. Demetrius has a house key, good friends, and a grandmother who occasionally helps him out. Beyond that, he is alone in the world.

## **Understanding Demetrius: A Theoretical Framework**

Relationships, and specifically the opportunities that come from or with them, prepare us for engaging with the larger world. It is a commonly held belief that those individuals with access to middle class educational, social, political, and financial networks, more often than not, navigate their own well-being with relative ease. For those individuals born into lesser economic and social stature it is often, at best, a struggle to gain entrée into the "culture of power" as Lisa Delpit refers to the dominant, mainstream ideologies and modes of communication. Stanton-Salazar (1997) concisely points out,

For all children and youth, healthy human development, general well being, school success, and economic and social integration in society depend on regular and unobstructed opportunities for constructing instrumental relationships with institutional agents... Second, for low-status children and youth the development of supportive

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relations with institutional agents outside the immediate kinship unit is systematically  
problematic.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1973) theories of social capital and social capital reproduction pre-date, but parallel, Delpit's notion of the "culture of power", underlies Stanton-Salazar's important work on social capital frameworks, and form the basis for yet another look at social capital formation. Social capital is the stock of relationships and networks available for enhancing an individual's economic, social, political, or educational opportunities (Bourdieu, 1973; Coleman, 1988). Social capital is accrued in the same ways as educational or economic capital and is easier to acquire once a sufficient base is achieved.

The benefits of social capital formation for children are clearly stated in the extant social science literature (Croninger & Lee, 1996; Farrel et al., 2004; Kutnick & Kington, 2005; Spielhagen and Cooper, 2000). The limitations on accruing social capital and common access points for the creation of social networks are also well researched. Many pieces of research in the field also address the lack access to social capital for single mothers, minorities, and youths, noting that many marginalized populations have difficulty creating social capital due to differences in "funds of knowledge" (Furstenberg, 2005; Ciabattari, 2007, Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Others, (Bruner and Chavez, 1998; Caughy, et al., 2006; Sikkink & Hernandez, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) discuss the importance of race, neighborhood, and specific settings on the formation of social capital. Most of these studies stop short of examining the process of building social networks or accruing social capital, especially for "low-status" (economically, socially, educationally speaking) individuals or groups. Bringing the question of what motivates individuals to engage in processes that build this capital and what opportunities and challenge arise as a result are valuable additions to the current body of literature on this topic.

## **Methodology**

What follows is a narrative compiled from observation, interviews, and artifacts about the relationships between a group of African-American children and parishioners in a predominately white, Catholic church. A mixed-method qualitative design based on a participant-observer model of ethnographic study and interviewing (Glesen, 2006) was conducted to complete this narrative. Specific to this design was a participatory-consciousness; a personal knowledge based on dialogue, solidarity, and shared emotional experience (Heshusius, 1994). Adult interview participants were chosen from a group of individuals who interact on a regular basis with the neighborhood children. Child interview participants were chosen from those children coming to mass without a parent, for whom parental permission to be interview was obtained. Interview questions came from the researcher's observations and were informed, in part, by Onyx and Bullen's 36 best questions to assess social capital, and subsequent adaptations of their social capital dimensions and questions (Farrell, et. al., 2004; Onyx & Bullen, 1997)

## **Essential Questions**

This narrative seeks to engage readers in the journey of a parish working to embrace children, not their own. The two essential questions this narrative tries to answer are:

What motivates the neighborhood children to attend mass and what motivates the acceptance of this group of children by particular adults in the church community?

What opportunities, in the form of social capital, and challenges, in all forms, do the children's presence bring to the parish and to the children themselves?

## **The Parish and the People**

St. Cronan's parish is a haven for diverse family structures and friendships. Most parishioners are well-educated, middle class, white, "commuters," save for a few small pockets of diversity or locals. This is ironic given that the parish is a cornerstone in the Forest Park Southeast neighborhood, one of the poorest, most racially segregated areas of St. Louis. Coined by the Archdiocese of St. Louis as a "social justice parish" and a "parish of personal choice," St. Cronan's membership is a broad circle of active parishioners.

The greatest challenge of the past five years to the social justice mandate has been in welcoming and caring for a group of "low-status" neighborhood children who upon their own volition, for three years have been regularly attending mass without any adult supervision. As one interviewee stated,

...there was a little culture change here, occasioned by them (the children) showing up. We kept talking about how important it was to be involved in the neighborhood and lamenting the fact that African Americans were not a part of the congregation and low and behold, African Americans become part of the congregation, but low and behold, the people that showed up were under the age of fifteen. You know, none of us could have ever predicted that...that the African Americans that showed up were going to be kids."

The children come to Sunday mass in groups of two to fourteen, ages four to fourteen. These children, like Demetrius, demonstrate coping skills that make them survivors in a neighborhood where not everyone survives and are all desperately seeking belonging, friendship, and guidance. They roam around the city with a degree of latitude rivaling adults, with their mobility limited only by where they can go on foot, without money, and in large groups without problems. Enter St. Cronan's.

Each week after mass there is fellowship in the parish center; the proverbial "coffee-and-doughnuts". Children have been attending coffee and doughnuts at St. Cronan's for forever. However, in the spring of 2004, four children from the neighborhood began to attend coffee-and-doughnuts *and* mass. This change happened as a result of an interaction with one parishioner. The neighborhood children, being admonished for eating snacks provided for spring cleaning workers, were invited to help by another parishioner. They helped and ate. From then on, these children, along with an occasional friend, came to church and sat with the woman who had asked them to help. The relationships with the children and the parish grew but only with select families who reached out independently to the children. At the same time the number of neighborhood children attending mass grew.

Today, on any given Sunday there are upwards of ten children from the neighborhood at mass. The "group" of neighborhood children is more like three or four groups of distinct friendship groupings that all know one another. There is progress in creating a lasting, more permanent and comprehensive relationship with these children through playgroups, trips, and outreach. One parish member commented,

I do think that it gets us...I mean I spend more time out walking the neighborhood and sitting out on the front steps.

While another notes,

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I guess I worry about them now and hope...that they feel like we're there not just to feed them but as somebody who can maybe be a go between and help them find what they need.

### **The Motivation Question**

What motivates these children to attend this Catholic parish? The answer is threefold. First, the children firmly believe that they are a part of the parish makeup, having “jobs” to do while at church – being in the choir, or helping at playgroup. All of the children also spoke of wanting to learn about God or getting to heaven, recognizing being close to God as a central tenet of belonging to the church. Second, when asked if they had “friends” at St. Cronan’s all of them, without a moment of hesitation, answered yes - adults *and* children. When asked how they knew that the people they were thinking of were their friends their answers varied, but all contained elements of established relationships. One child noted, “they help me”. Another said, “they play with me”. Multiple children pointed out the affection parishioners provided in the form of hugs, greetings, and conversation. One of the older, more articulate children described these interactions by saying,

(I know they are my friends because) they be nice to me every time I come to church. And they...they say good morning or hi and ask me how I'm doing and how's my family.

All of the children interviewed indicated that they would come to someone at St. Cronan’s if they needed help with a problem. They saw the parishioners as people who could help them with homework, minor medical care, disagreements with friends, and getting “stuff that you need”. One of the older students mentioned that he would, “be friends with them (the parishioners) share secrets and personal things...like toys.” The children see the parishioners as part of their everyday world. It is notable that here are at least four other churches in the vicinity that these children could also attend. Whether they articulate it clearly or not, they choose to attend St. Cronan’s because of the relationships that they’ve built within the parish. These relationships form the basis for the children accruing some much needed social capital.

As for the motivations of the adults who choose to engage the neighborhood children? There are many. Each of the adult interviewees commented on the need to be a substitute parent. Half thought their careers/involvement with children made it easier for them to engage and the children and understand their neediness. Personal beliefs about the value of children and living the Gospel were consistently cited as motivation to become involved. More often than not, the motivations of the individuals interviewed were overlapping and deeply entwined with the ability to connect their own personal philosophies/beliefs with action. Interestingly, two of the lesser mentioned motivators were being “officially” asked to help or a sense of obligation. One of the most poignant comments regarding motivation was,

Part of my reaction (to the neighborhood children) was hearing other parishioners talk disparagingly about the disruption that the kids cause...And recognizing how easily these kids can not be valued.

Regardless of the reason for the initial interactions, two key findings arose from the adult interviews regarding the motivation behind maintaining relationships with the children. First, all of the adults engaging with the children recognized that they were using their own talents to do so – be that music, mothering abilities, a social work or teaching background, a love of sports. “I do music,” one said. “I’m a catechist with the children,” said another. “So one day I hooked him up with D---, ‘cause D---

Draft – please do not circulate or cite without permission used to play basketball,” said a third. Second, the interviewees were consistently able to notice the children’s positive contributions, as individuals with worth and value, to the parish. Over half of the adults commented that once they learned the children’s names that their relationship flourished. One commented,

Just seeing the ones that come to faith formation and sharing their gifts and perspectives, and their drawing and art work (changed my relationship with the children).

Another said, “you treat these young persons with respect and with delight and admiration for their amazing coping skills.” The adults who embrace the neighborhood children sense the importance of the connections for the children and are able to use their talents to access the children and reflect on the benefits of the relationships for everyone involved.

### **Challenges and Opportunities – Same Coin Different Sides**

Throughout their interviews, the children clearly articulated that they felt valued and a part of the parish. One said, “I’ve had the greatest experience that I’ve never had with any other churches.” Another shared, “I will keep coming to St. Cronan’s ‘cause I love St. Cronan’s.” One of the longest standing neighborhood children interviewed said,

I will keep coming to St. Cronan’s because it is a very neat place, and it is run very well and the plants are good and everything is turning out good for me ever since I started coming to this church.

The adult interviewees knew that neighborhood children benefited from participating and coming to church but fewer than half recognized the potential for the children to accrue additional social capital through those behaviors and interactions. Only one interviewee articulated clearly the notion that networks and capital might be built through their relationships at St. Cronan’s. From contact about one of the “field trips” she said,

There were a number of parents who said they were delighted... that their children found a church community... one of the mothers has cancer... And so it felt to me that there was more we could be doing in terms of reaching out... I feel like there is a lot of potential for... branching out because of the children feeling comfortable, or in some way at home.

When asked if any of the neighborhood children had ever asked them for help with a problem, only one adult began by stating yes with conviction. Each of the other adult interviewees noted that they “did not know”, or had never been asked to help with a “real” problem, or that they didn’t have “that kind of relationship” or that if they had they “hadn’t noticed”. Immediately following this, each interviewee described scenarios where they provided help regarding transportation, finding friends, first aid, food, money, fighting, stealing, playing; things that were, in every real sense, problems for these children. The disconnect between how big the problems were for the children versus how inconsequential they seemed to the adults speaks volumes about the assumptions and lives of individuals with higher levels of social mobility and capital lead.

All but one of the adults interviewed recognized the doors that the neighborhood children open in terms of building a stronger relationship with the neighborhood. The adults believed that the children were potential access points for the parish to other families and children and that they were a conduit for communication with neighborhood as a whole. One interviewee noted,

These children opened doors for me. They broke down barriers; by showing up they made it easier for me to reach out to them...

And yet there are still challenges with the children being part of the fabric of the parish. As in the beginning, it remains a small, core group of individuals who are responsible for the continued advocacy on their behalf with the rest of the parish. Many parishioners are reluctant to embrace the children. Moreover, there is still a gap in the knowledge that many people have about the children, in terms of their needs and gifts that they bring to the parish. As one interviewee noted,

I think there is a lack of understanding, especially a cultural lack. I mean, 'cause these kids, you know, they talk and do things in a way that can sometimes be sort of threatening to guys who grew up in the suburbs. And it isn't really threatening; it's just how they do it.

She continued by saying,

The kids don't have a contract that they will hand to an adult that says, I'm going to ask you for emotional support thirteen times throughout the year. And I'm gonna want to sit with you in the pew for a total of twenty-eight minutes at certain times in five minute intervals throughout the year just so I can sit down and have a grounding place for those five minutes.

Another interviewee concurred saying,

The neighborhood children provide a great opportunity for our community members to put into practice what we preach and believe. A lot of social justice issues tend to focus on people who aren't in such proximity to us...it is very challenging, because of their proximity, their weekly attendance.

The children and adults who have reshaped this parish over the past three years all see the relationship continuing. Every child noted that they would continue to attend St. Cronan's, just as all of the adults contemplated a parish that includes these children down the road. A clear consensus regarding the children's belonging is evident despite the fact that more work needs to be done to continue to create the social capital that is possible for both sides. Many interviewees commented on the work that still needs to be done to fully integrate these children into the fold of the parish. Another succinctly noted the unique situation that the parish is in,

They (the neighborhood children) are hard to miss. They call forth...you know, by being there, children without adults, they demand a response. And you can't schedule that on your calendar. You can't step away from it. You can stay where you are...You can stand still and not go out to meet them but you can't escape from their presence...from their neediness that they put out there and the gifts that they are constantly bringing too.

## **Lessons**

The benefits from the formation of social capital, particularly for low-status children, cannot be underestimated or overstated. The processes by which social capital is accrued is complicated and fraught with complications for children. Bearing these ideas in mind and

Draft – please do not circulate or cite without permission with the vignettes presented above these seven lessons for individuals and groups concerned with social capital formation to consider:

#### Lesson #1

A great deal of education, particularly by example, about social capital is required in order for the magnitude of the concept to be truly understood by those who take social capital for granted.

#### Lesson #2

When individuals examine their own beliefs about groups different from themselves they become more motivated to and capable of assisting those populations in building social capital.

#### Lesson #3

Using a talent or skill as a point of access for relationships with different populations of children allows relationships to sustain themselves and flourish.

#### Lesson #4

Relationships must be ongoing, personal, and mutually beneficial for social capital to form.

#### Lesson #5

Children see themselves as part of communities where they are welcomed and valued. While most do not readily articulate an understanding of the value of those communities, they act in ways that indicate an understanding and value for the relationships those communities provide.

#### Lesson #6

Children want, and need, to be associated with groups in the way that adults are associated with groups. Their assimilation seems to facilitate belonging and the acquisition of additional social capital.

#### Lesson #7

All adults, regardless of class, often underestimate the depth to which personal interaction and attention matter. Knowing children's names, honoring the magnitude of their daily struggles, and acknowledging successes however small are critical to lasting social capital formation.

### **Conclusion**

Along with his powerful notion of social capital, Bourdieu believed in critical examination of individual understandings of academic theories as they relate to practice – bringing this project full circle (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Reflexive study de-intellectualizes the Academy in a way that provides more access to its bodies of knowledge. Thus the intersection of theory and practice, in this case, of faith and study, and this particular parish allows for a deeper conversation about the formation of social capital. This study, like Bourdieu's work and others after him, seeks to affirm the primacy of relationships to economic and social well-being and the inherent inequities of all types of capital, including social capital, in the Western world.

\*Names and details have been changed in this vignette.

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