

It Takes an Artistic Village: an Ethnographic  
Exploration of a Community Youth Arts Center

by

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## **It Takes an Artistic Village: an Ethnographic Exploration of a Community Youth Arts Center**

### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this ethnography is to uncover the social world of a community youth arts center. Utilizing Oddfellows Playhouse and its neighborhood troupes program as a micro case, this extended case method study seeks to understand whether or not variations of social and cultural capital theory can explain the social behavior and processes that occur within community youth arts institutions. The study finds that social capital theory is most useful in explaining the development of positive bonding social networks and the institutional presence of collective bridging capital, while cultural capital theory is most useful explaining the transmission of a middle-class-based form of cultural capital. While these theories are helpful in explaining the social behavior and processes of the playhouse in certain instances, each theory's preoccupation with instrumental reason and social mobility do not fully explain other fundamental aspects of the institution.

**In Sweet and Loving Memory of Diane Shaw**

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Communities throughout America are comprised of a patchwork of institutions: businesses, hospitals, churches, schools, and recreation centers, all places that provide various social services to individuals. Sociologists spend a great deal of time studying these institutions in depth, largely assessing their utility, operation, and relationships to individuals. Traditionally, social and cultural capital theory has been a useful guide for many sociologists while trying to explain the social processes of such institutions. Variations of social and cultural capital theory have been particularly helpful in explaining the value of social and cultural activity for individual and collective advancement and articulating the net contributions to a civil society (Bourdieu 1986; Putnam 2000; Lareau 2003). A community youth art center is a rather unique gem of a social institution that has not received a lot of attention from sociologists. As an institution that is a cross between an entertainment center, a school, and a social gathering hub; community youth art centers are deserving of critical sociological analysis. Considering how social and cultural capital theory have provided insight to the operation of social clubs, schools, and other civic organizations, I'm interested to see if these theories still apply to an institution that reflects a combination of these. Oddfellows Playhouse in Middletown CT, is a community youth art center that offers the possibility for a rich empirical study that analyzes the presence and transmission of social and cultural capitals. Honored throughout the years for its outstanding contributions to youth development and education, the playhouse could be

deemed as a successful model to an effective community youth art center (Oddfellows website [www.oddfellows.org](http://www.oddfellows.org) accessed 10/17/2008). While utilizing the extended case method to analyze the application of theory to data, this study also seeks to expand upon existing theories with a nuanced critique of its limitations (Burawoy 1991).

### *Entering the Space*

The minute I walk inside Oddfellows playhouse, I can literally feel the creative energy emanate from the brightly colored walls. There is thumping from a breakdancing class that students are taking in the classroom to my right, and in the distance I see two students rehearsing a scene for the main stage play. I make my way down the hallway. Bobbye, the director of the neighborhood troupes program, is seated in the office to my left. She along with three other staff members greet me with a quick yet friendly smile, as they busily work away at their desks, making phone calls to parents, drafting proposals for grants, and seeing to the multitude of tasks that ensure smooth operation of the non-profit theater. Even though they are consumed by the strenuous tasks that are required to run a non-profit arts organization, their committed presence indicates that each one of them cares deeply about the arts and has a vested interest in spreading the joy of the arts to as many people as possible. I definitely get the vibe that staff would not be doing what they were doing if they didn't love it. I continue down the hall where I meet the troupe leader, Missy, and discuss the day's agenda. She informs me that the

visiting artist will be arriving soon and the students will be creating their own paint from fruits and vegetables during class. After our quick conversation I walk over to the kitchen to prepare the day's snack of pretzels and animal crackers, the perfect treat for four-nine year olds. While preparing snack, I take a minute to reflect and think, "Wow, wouldn't it be great if everyone had access to great artistic communities like this while growing up?" This leads me to think about the larger social purpose of this arts haven. Who/What is it comprised of? Why is such an institution necessary? What does it offer for the individuals who attend it and the surrounding community? What function do such institutions have in the larger society? It becomes clear to me that if I want to find the answers to some of these questions, I would have to stay around a little bit longer and conduct sociological research.

### *General Background of Oddfellows*

Before delving into all the theoretical and empirical elements of this ethnography, I'll start by providing a brief contextual history of the field site. Oddfellows Playhouse is a non-profit community youth theater in Middletown CT that was founded in 1975 by a small group of Wesleyan University students to engage children from diverse backgrounds in the theater arts. Over the years, Oddfellows has developed into the largest and most active youth theater in Connecticut, serving approximately 2,000 students aged 2-20 from all regions of Middlesex County.



Oddfellows' mission is three-fold:

- 1) an artistic dimension to provide high-quality theater by and for young people;
- 2) an educational dimension to promote the growth of young people--in skills, knowledge, and self-confidence--through the performing arts;
- 3) a social action dimension to offer opportunities especially to underserved and at-risk youngsters to promote the development of a genuinely multiracial, multicultural society. (Oddfellows Playhouse website [www.oddfellows.org](http://www.oddfellows.org) accessed 10/17/2008)

Oddfellows' programming includes a series of tuition-based performing arts courses, a rich calendar of main stage and mini-productions, a summer children's circus program, the "Kids on the Block" disability awareness program, and the Neighborhood Troupes program. This study focuses primarily upon the playhouse's central social justice program, the neighborhood troupes program. The troupes program offers free after-school weekly performing arts classes during the school year for 175 "at-risk" youth from Middletown's and Portland's lowest income areas.

### *Purpose of this Ethnography*

The purpose of this ethnography is to uncover the social world of a community youth arts center. In doing so I am interested in examining the varying presence and transmission patterns of cultural and social capital on the individual level and on the collective level.

On the individual level, I am interested in discovering whether the social networks the students develop in the playhouse are all positive, or whether there is there also a chance for students to also develop "bad" social capital? I would like to see what exactly are the consequences of these

social networks on a student's achievement and personal growth. Not only am I interested in the student-to-student social capital that is developed in the classroom, but also I am interested in the collective social capital that is developed as a result of the interaction of students, staff, teachers, visiting artists, and Wesleyan students in one space. Does Oddfellows represent a collective source of "bridging" or more of a source of "bonding" social capital (Putnam 2000), And lastly, does it function as a "public good" to the Middletown community (Carnoy 2007)?

I will then look at how Oddfellows individually transmits culture to its students via curriculum and activities. Does the playhouse transmit capital in a way that Gloria Ladson-Billings would consider culturally relevant, through a pedagogical approach that is process-oriented and culturally sensitive (Ladson-Billings 1994)? I am particularly interested in observing the potential facilitation of two child-rearing practices that function as distinct applications of cultural capital theory, "concerted cultivation" and "accomplishment of natural growth accomplishment" (Lareau 2003). Does the neighborhood troupes program facilitate a concerted cultivation approach in students who by and large come from natural growth backgrounds? Or does it promote a combination of both approaches? These questions provide the framework of my empirical study. My data consist of a series of close to four years of familiarity working as a work-study teaching assistant at the playhouse, two weeks of extensive participant observations from a mini-ethnography I conducted during the fall of 2007, ten weeks of participant-observations during

the fall of 2008, as well as interviews with six selected interviewees. Over the course of the study, I plan to look at instances where these theories may or may not apply directly to the data that I extrapolate as I attempt to gain a better understanding of what exactly is the impact of a community youth arts center.

### *Outline of Ethnography*

I begin this ethnography with a serious theoretical exploration, focusing primarily on seminal sociological work in social and cultural capital theories. I then segue to a broad literature review, where I take a look at a variety of related prior studies and research in the sociology of education, communities, education and arts education policy. I explain the general empirical procedures, logistics, biases, and limitations of the study in the methodology section, followed by a description of setting, where I introduce the actors and general activities of the playhouse. I then uncover the rich qualitative data from my interviews and observations in the data analysis section and apply the data to social and cultural capital theories. I conclude the study with a report of my findings along with a critique/expansion of cultural and social capital theory.

## THEORETICAL EXPLORATIONS

### *Overview*

Before discussing the empirical components of my research, I'd like to examine several social theorists contributions to capital theory. The French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses the notion and relevance of capital in the social world (Bourdieu 1986). In his eyes, capital is a fundamental aspect of society stemming from the product of accumulated labor. Capital accumulates over time and manifests itself in different forms, economic, social, and cultural. Simply put, economic capital concerns hard cash and assets, social capital concerns the resources stemming from group membership and social networks, and cultural capital concerns educational qualifications, skills, and an embodied set of dispositions. These three forms of capitals, by and large, facilitate the possibility for understanding the structures and functions of the social world. In this ethnography, I utilize Bourdieu's concept of social and cultural capitals as a base for my theoretical exploration, while expanding on it with other theorist's conceptualizations.

### *Cultural Capital*

Bourdieu views cultural capital as existing in three states: The *embodied* state--the state that concerns the inherent aspects of the mind and body, the *objectified* state-- the state of material objects (e.g. books, musical instruments), and the *institutionalized* state – which constitutes academic credentials and qualifications (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu believes cultural

capital to have a strong correlation to economic capital, particularly in the objectified and institutionalized states. In the objectified state, for example, purchasing cultural goods such as a painting or a book presupposes some sort of economic capital. Similarly in the institutionalized state, where academic credentials and qualifications are at issue, there must also be some sort of economic investment in toward such a credentialing program that will yield cultural capital. Bourdieu extends his discussion of cultural capital in his most acclaimed work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), where he introduces the concepts of “habitus” and “field” to his cultural capital theory. According to Bourdieu, habitus is the “system of dispositions characteristic of the different classes and class fractions” (1984:6). It is the internalized basis on which an individual makes distinctions and judgments on social things. It is something that begins its development in the family, but is later affected by daily interactions and conditions. Bourdieu’s concept of the field, on the other hand, is the stratified social space within which an individual makes distinctions (1984). The field is not merely a contained social institution, as David Swartz points out; the field is much more of a space where consensus doesn’t always occur and boundaries aren’t necessarily established (Swartz 1998). This study will thoroughly examine the dynamics of the playhouse’s field and the manifestations of cultural capital in its embodied.

Annette Lareau applies the concept of embodied cultural capital in two of her ethnographic works, *Unequal Childhoods* (2003) and *Home Advantage*

(2000). In both of these works, she Americanizes Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital by putting Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, the field, and capital into an American context. She identifies sources of cultural capital and assesses its impact on individuals, most specifically elementary- school children. In each case, she evaluates the relationship between biography and social structure looking closely at the lives and experiences of various children and the ways in which familial social-class differences affect each child's social outcomes.

In *Unequal Childhoods* Lareau evaluates one of the major ways through which cultural capital is transmitted to children, child-rearing. According to Lareau, a distinct cultural logic and repertoire affects the child-rearing practices of working-class and middle-class parents. She argues that working-class parents adopt an approach that she refers to as "accomplishment of natural growth", while middle-class parents adopt a "concerted cultivation" approach. These two terms are concepts derived from cultural capital theory. Natural growth is characterized by: children experiencing a great deal of leisure time, a clear boundary line between adult and children, dependence on institutions, child initiated play, and daily interaction with siblings. One of the major consequences of the "accomplishment of natural growth" approach is a child's acquiring a sense of limitation with social institutions. Concerted cultivation, on the other hand, is characterized by children engaging in multiple adult-orchestrated leisure activities, extended negotiations between parents and children, and child-

based criticism. The consequence of this approach is the child's acquired sense of entitlement (Lareau 2003:31).

According to Lareau, these two child-rearing approaches by and large dictate how children view themselves in relation to the outside world. She demonstrates this effect by closely documenting the life experiences of eight families, evenly split between the middle and working class. While documenting the experiences of these families, she pays close attention to how the families organize their daily lives, language use, and relations with institutions. Lareau's analysis clearly demonstrates that parental social class plays a tremendous role in the types of experiences and resources a child encounters while growing up, which directly affects a child's academic achievement and personal growth. By distinguishing between the two child rearing approaches, Lareau is able to identify some of the advantages and disadvantages of transmitting cultural capital to children. For instance, children who grow up with the concerted cultivation approach might have the benefits of high self-confidence and participation in activities that would facilitate a smooth entry into the middle class, yet they run the risk of becoming overtaxed and burdened by their demanding schedules.

In *Home Advantage*, Lareau engages once again in an empirical study of cultural capital by studying the linkages between American education, family, and class-structure institutions. Lareau closely scrutinizes the relationship between parental social class and parental involvement in school and how the two directly affect the experiences of elementary-school children.

Once again, Lareau clearly identifies the family as an institution that plays a role in transmitting cultural capital to children. She shows how parental social class and cultural dispositions have a direct correlation to the extent of parental involvement in a child's schooling. She focuses her analysis on two elementary schools, one predominantly white and working-class (Colton) the other predominantly white and upper middle class (Prescott). She characterizes the relations between working-class families and their school by "separation", while upper middle class families demonstrate a more "interconnectedness" to their school (Lareau 2000:8). The working-class families see school as a hands-off institution, and more or less trust schoolteachers and administrators to educate their children. They engage in very little intervention or criticism of the institution, and the processes of in-home learning and academic reinforcement are inconsistent. The middle-and upper-class families see their relationship to school in a different way. They understand that the activity of educating a child is a responsibility shared between the family and the school, which inevitably means high levels of in-home learning and reinforcement. These attitudes towards education automatically result in a more active presence in the school; these parents may criticize the administration and the teaching and request particular teachers and programs for their children.

From her empirical investigation, Lareau concludes that cultural capital decisively informs the linkage between social structure and individual biography by taking into account human agency and internal variation.



(Lareau 2000:176) Her analysis in *Home Advantage* ultimately suggests that the operation of cultural capital requires a great deal of investment and activation. The fact that a family holds upper-class status and maintains a certain type of cultural capital does not necessarily suggest that a child from that family will automatically do better in school; the family still must make a series of investments and activations of cultural capital in order to reap the benefits.

If Lareau were to study the operation of cultural capital in Oddfellows' neighborhood troupes program, she would make an argument that the playhouse attempts to achieve a hybrid between accomplishment of natural growth and concerted cultivation for students who largely come from families who adopt a "separation" approach toward such educational programs. I imagine that inside the classroom, she would witness the teachers and staff seeking a balance between giving students a rich and stimulating lesson plan full of diverse and creative activities while also giving students ample time for self-initiated play.

### *Social Capital*

According to Bourdieu, social capital is derived from an individual's access to durable networks of institutionalized relationships and membership in various social groups (1986). This implies that all social networks have some sort of value ascribed to them, and that one can measure the ways in which an individual can profit from his/her social networks. These social networks exist in one's community, in the workplace, in recreational activities, etc. An individual in one of these social networks participates in a process of social exchange with other members in the group. In this social exchange, mutual understanding and recognition eventually develops to the point that an individual understands the conditions and limits of such a social network. One of these conditions includes the existence of some sort of agent or representative body that essentially dictates the order of things for the network. Once the order, limits, and conditions of a particular social network are defined, an individual may start reaping the benefits of such social networks.

Robert Putnam offers an interesting perspective on social capital in *Bowling Alone* (2000), where he essentially argues that social capital has been on a considerable decline in American society. He portrays a modern America where citizens have become increasingly more disconnected from each other and where social institutions have disintegrated. While Putnam spends much of his time arguing his thesis of the decline of social capital, he also provides a solid framework of what social capital is and how it operates

on the community level in American society. According to Putnam, social capital consists of the “connections among individuals, and the social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” A key feature of this definition for Putnam is the reciprocity piece, a piece that implies the possibility for mutual cooperation and benefit in a civil society. Putnam distinguishes between two forms of social capital, bridging and bonding. Fundamentally, bridging is the more inclusive form of social capital that seeks to create external linkages for purposes of information diffusion, while bonding is the more exclusive form that has a very specific group-solidarity-building function. Putnam’s examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organizations, while his examples of bonding social capital include country clubs, fraternities/sororities and reading groups. Putnam points out that social capital does not always operate so positively. Negative social capital is represented in networks that can be directed toward destructive and malevolent purposes. Examples of such negative networks include urban gangs and the KKK. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam presents a case for the influence of both positive bonding and bridging social capital in American society asserting that America’s economy, democracy, health, and happiness rely heavily on a substantial supply of social capital.

Alejandro Portes’ offers yet another layer to this discussion of social capital by closely exploring its positive and negative operation. In “Social Capital: Its origins and applications in modern society,” Portes distinguishes

between three basic social functions of social capital, as a source of social control, a source of family support, and a source of benefits through extra-familial networks (Portes 1998:11). As he distinguishes between each basic function he explains its specific operation in student academic performance, child intellectual development, employment and occupational attainment, immigrant and ethnic enterprise, and juvenile delinquency prevention (Portes 1998:11). In each of these cases, strong social networks have the ability to produce favorable social outcomes for the individuals who have access to them. While Portes explains in detail how each social function has the ability to produce such positive outcomes, he readily admits social capital's tendency to also operate negatively, suggesting that it has the potential to do such things like exclude outsiders and restrict individual freedom (Portes 1998:17).

If these theorists were to assess the operation of social capital in Oddfellows' neighborhood troupes program, I would imagine that they would encounter a pretty socially complex operation. Putnam would deem the social networks that he witnessed in the program to be reciprocal, considering the probability that students, faculty, and staff treat each other with mutual cooperation and respect. In terms of form, he would acknowledge a distinction between an intra-level and external operation of social capital. In the intra-level, Putnam would see a considerably high presence of bonding social capital that is based upon students socializing and bonding while they are in class and participating in various activities. In the external level,

however, Putnam would see an extensive operation of bridging social capital, as the playhouse primarily functions as a community institutional hub for many individuals in the region. Portes would label the neighborhood troupe's program large and relatively positive "extra-familial network", with very little social exclusion and compromise on individuality.

### *Section Summary*

Social and cultural capital theory help contextualize the study of Oddfellows in a solid sociological framework. Bourdieu's early work in *Forms of Capital* functions as a foundation of capital theory, as it explains each form (economic, social, cultural) in itself, how it relates to one another, and the potential for conversions (1986). The in-depth discussion of cultural capital theory in Bourdieu's *Distinction* expands upon these early foundations by introducing the concepts of field and habitus (1984). The concepts of field and habitus add layers of complexity when contemplating the origins, development, and transmission of cultural capital. Lareau is able to Americanize and apply some of these Bourdieuan concepts in her works *Unequal Childhoods* and *Home Advantage* (2003;2000). In these works, she explores the influences of family social status, schooling, and child-rearing approaches on the operation of cultural capital. In this ethnography, I will consider and extensively incorporate Lareau's theoretical concepts of accomplishment of natural growth and concerted cultivation. Putnam and Portes works offer insight into the nuances of social capital operation.

Putnam's theorization of "bonding" vs. "bridging" and Portes theorization of "positive" vs. "negative" capital are distinctions that I will consider when analyzing social capital's presence (2000;1998).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The theories examined in the last section provide the necessary abstract and conceptual foundations before exploring some of the more empirical literature that is available on the subject. This section will specifically focus on recent study in social and cultural capital as well as prior research conducted in the areas of education, communities, the arts, class, and culture. These specific investigations will set the groundwork for my empirical investigation of Oddfellows.

### *Education and Communities*

As I take a closer look at the educational framework and intra/inter-level social structure of Oddfellows, I give consideration to prior research in the sociology of education and communities. Recent research specific to the study of sociology of communities expands upon the classical sociological concept of “Gemeinschaft”- term utilized by the German sociologist Tonnies to explain the condition when individuals are oriented to large associations more than to their own self interests (Tonnies 2001). While looking at data from 50 urban communities in America, Stephen Vaisey notes how communities are sustained by a shared moral order among a set of individuals (Vaisey 2007). This concept of moral order is applied to educational context in research that explores the considerable academic achievement advantage students derive from attending American Catholic schools (Bryk, Lee and Holland 1993). Analyzing elements such as

curriculum, demographic composition, school governance, and organization the researchers find that the communal principles that Catholic schools are founded upon are advantageous for their students. Their study incorporates of the theoretical discussion of social capital, by offering an instance where an institutional stock of collective social capital produces benefits for individuals who are members of that institution.

James S. Coleman finds similar benefits of social capital in a study that connects social capital to the creation of human capital (1988). Coleman examines the high school dropout rates of public, Catholic, and private schools. The Catholic schools indeed have the lowest dropout rates among the three. The Catholic school's low dropout rate is largely attributed to the high stock of collective social capital that is infused into the Catholic school social structure. This notion leads to Coleman's acknowledgment that social capital operates as a "public good," essentially having the potential to benefit all individuals within a given social structure (1988:116) Martin Carnoy also discusses social capital functioning as a "public good" as he examines the educational systems of three Latin American countries Cuba, Chile, and Brazil (2007). The study finds that Cuban schools perform significantly better than the schools of its Latin American peers. He points out that this performance success is largely attributed to Cuba's high stock of "state generated social capital"(Carnoy 2007:52), This term goes beyond the social capital that is commonly found in familial and community structures and extends its operation to political and social contexts. The communal



characteristics of Cuba's socialist state directly contribute to this state-generated form of social capital. This study finds that state-generated social capital largely impacts such things as classroom atmosphere, student attendance, and parent/teacher expectations. While I don't intend to study social capital on the state-level, I am very interested in Oddfellow's contribution to community-generated social capital. All of this research definitely points to the correlation between broader social contexts and the educational and social outcomes for students. Bruce Rankin and James Quane continue this line of investigation by examining the effects of neighborhoods, families, and peers on African-American youth who, similar to the students who attend Oddfellows playhouse, come from working poor "at-risk" backgrounds (2002). Their study focuses on the interplay of these elements as contributing to the development of "youth-directed social capital", which has the potential to produce favorable or deleterious social outcomes for youth. They find that family and peer networks have the most influence on youth outcomes. Building on this research of the influence of family networks, Robert Ream and Gregory Palardy examine the interplay of parental social capital and social class difference affecting middle school student's educational experiences (2008). They find that parental social capital positively affects the educational experiences of middle-class families, while lower class families are disadvantaged with lower stocks of social capital. In another study, Quane and Rankin spend more time investigating features of the neighborhood, specifically the influence of community-based

youth service organizations (2006). Once again the researchers center their research on the experiences of “at-risk” and underserved African American youth. The study examines youth who participate in youth-service organizations, and the impact of such organizations on the development of young people’s educational expectations, self-concept, and academic commitment. Another benefit of youth participating in such voluntary organizations is a strong sense “social connectedness” (Kay and Bradbury 2009). Ultimately, youth who commit themselves to such programs and organizations over time are more likely to participate in community and political activities in their adulthood (McFarland and Thomas 2006).

These studies indicate the effects of capital on educational conditions and processes. Not only does capital operate on the individual level, it also functions on a broader collective level, as indicated by Coleman’s investigation of Catholic schools. The possibility of capital functioning as a “public good” is something worth considering while analyzing the dynamics of the playhouse. These studies also suggest the high influence of external conditions and factors on a student’s achievement and success. Neighborhood conditions and peer networks are examples of such critical external factors that should be kept in mind for this study.

### *Arts, Class, and Culture*

While Oddfellows indeed functions as an educational space, providing rich after-school programs to students, the arts are fundamental to the playhouse's mission. Prior research in the sociology of culture and arts consumption provides another relevant frame that is worth consideration.

Paul DiMaggio and Michael Useem investigate the correlation between some of these issues (1978). While DiMaggio and Useem spend a great deal of time on the social consequences of high arts consumption, which is something irrelevant to my study of Oddfellows, they still provide a solid framework for my understanding of how the arts relate to cultural and social capital. Their work largely explores an applied working of cultural and social capital by delving into the politics of arts and cultural consumption in the United States and how such consumption affects class culture and social networks. DiMaggio and Useem identify elements such as occupation, education, and income as factors that affect the likelihood of arts exposure and consumption, with education being the most salient. They reveal how the arts function as an institutional ground for class structures and cultures to be reinforced, suggesting that the arts help build social solidarity. This observation leads to their acknowledgement that the arts have the tendency to include, while exclude simultaneously. They assert how arts consumption is a strategic component of cultural capital stock that could be utilized to promote social and economic mobility. They also explain how parents might want their children to seek early participation in the arts so that they'll develop

adult interests in culture and continue to be active participants and consumers in the arts, which may lead to greater social and economic advantages (DiMaggio and Useem 1978).

A study conducted by Karen Aschaffenburg and Ineke Mass picks up on this notion of early cultural participation by youth and its subsequent long-term effects (1998). Their study mainly addresses the correlation of cultural capital to an individual's educational career, assessing the influence of cultural participation, parental cultural capital, and social class on one's educational attainment. For Aschaffenburg and Mass, cultural capital is "not a simple by-product or reflection of class position, but is actively deployed in making hierarchical distinctions in reproducing social inequalities" (Aschaffenburg and Mass 1997:573). Their study finds that early cultivation of cultural capital via socialization and participation in high status cultural activities matters in a child's educational attainment. In this finding, they acknowledge the operation of the child's own and the parent's cultural capital contributing to the result. This finding definitely relates to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital's development and operation in habitus and the field (1984), where Bourdieu articulates the cultivation and transmission of cultural capital initially taking place in home family networks. It also suggests an instance where a substantial base of economic capital leads to the cultivation of cultural capital (1986). This system of cultural reproduction and mobility also operates internationally (Kraaykamp and De Graff 2000). A study conducted in the Netherlands ultimately finds that parental cultural capital, specifically

parental reading activity, significantly correlates to the educational attainment of children.

Paul DiMaggio (1982) reports on a related study assessing the impact of cultural capital on student high school grades. In the study, he takes into account student participation in art, music, and literature and seeks a correlation to the student's grades in English, history, and mathematics. DiMaggio finds that there is an academic advantage for students who engage in high-art forms (i.e. classical music, ballet, museum attendance) most significantly in the effect on grades in the subjects of English and history, and to a lesser extent on mathematics. Interestingly, DiMaggio doesn't find any academic advantage for students who engage in middlebrow art forms (drawing, crafts, photography). It is important to keep in mind that DiMaggio's study focuses only on white high-school students, a demographic feature that definitely limits the generalizability of his study. If DiMaggio were to study Oddfellows I'd imagine that he would encounter an environment that wasn't consistently academically advantageous, as a result of the playhouse's support of both high and low art forms. Nonetheless, DiMaggio's study provides a specific exploration of the effects of youth arts participation.

The aforementioned studies specifically concern cultural capital with regard to exclusivity and social mobility. Each of the researchers places high art consumption and participation in the center of his/her research. I, however, would argue against this exclusive focus on the arts as it relates to consumption and mobility for narrowness and bias toward high art forms. I

would imagine that for a place such as Oddfellows, arts participation for the purpose of social mobility is not the main objective for the students or for the institution. There is a good chance that students gain considerably more in the arenas of emotional and personal development. Ultimately, I am interested in studying the diversity of artistic forms offered at Oddfellows and the varying resulting social and cultural effects it has on the individual and community at large.

### *Youth Arts Education Programs*

In contrast to the prior studies above, Sharon Verner Chappell (2006) specifically studies the impact of arts education on “at-risk” youth. In her investigation she critiques traditional educational theorists stance on the benefits of cultural capital, the position that “arts education tames and cultures at risk youth to middle class values” (Chappell 2006: 6). She further explains how in this model, certain cultures, knowledge, and experiences are valued more highly than others. She proposes an alternative approach to arts education that provides certain individual-level and macro-level benefits that facilitate personal growth a broader understanding of people and the world. Chappell’s view of arts education is very consistent with a pedagogical approach championed by Gloria Ladson-Billings. She articulates an approach that “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings 1994: 22). While Ladson-Billing’s pedagogy is theorized

within the traditional K-12 framework, it is nevertheless still applicable to community youth arts institutions such as Oddfellows.

Shirley Brice Heath approaches arts education in a similar vein (1999). Heath believes community based arts organizations that are geared towards youth fill an “institutional gap” that many students have while searching for productive activities during nonschool hours (Heath 1999:21). Heath further explains how on the individual level these community based arts organizations offer students a means to develop communication skills and ample opportunities to take necessary personal risks, critical elements that they may not acquire as readily in the traditional school environment. Heath’s research is consistent with the findings of the extensive “Coming up taller report” conducted by Americans for the Arts and President Clinton’s 1994 Committee on the Art and the Humanities (1994). After analyzing over 200 after-school, weekend, and summer arts and humanities programs targeted to youth, the report identified some of the most effective strategies and characteristics of these programs. The report suggests:

Youth must have sustained, caring relationship with adults; receive guidance in facing serious challenges; become a valued member of a constructive peer group, feel a sense of worth as a person, become socially competent, know how to use the support systems available to them; achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices; find constructive expression of the curiosity and exploration that strongly characterizes their age; believe in a promising future with real opportunities; and find ways of being useful to others. In short, children and youth need caring families and communities (1994).

Other less extensive studies laud such institutions and programs for functioning as strategic tools for crime prevention by giving participants a

heightened sense of social inclusion and belonging (America for the Arts 1999; Allan and Lynch 2007).

While proponents of arts education are easy to marvel over the benefits and strides of such programs, it is important to keep in mind the often dire challenges many programs face. Not only do many of these programs constantly struggle for general funding and resources, they also must realize that the extent of their impact is highly dependent upon a series of external factors. One study that tracks the experiences of students in the New York City based Young Talent program suggests how participant success in the program is affected by external elements such as: family circumstances, safety concerns, peer resentment and social stigmas (Oreck et al. 2000).

These studies largely suggest the importance and value of arts education programs for youth. Research indicates that students gain social-emotional benefits, communication skills, and alternative activity to drugs and crime from such programs. As I expand upon this literature with my research at Oddfellows, I am particularly interested in how such arts programs fill the “institutional gap” in learning (1999), and whether or not Ladson-Billing’s theory of “cultural relevance” is integrated into programming (1994).

### *Summary of Theory, Literature and Hypotheses*

The theory and literature provide both an abstracted and varied empirical foundation to this ethnography. Capital theory serves as an important frame to consider when I analyze the dynamics and operation of



Oddfellows. While I don't expect capital theory to explain all of the social phenomena of the playhouse, I do expect that it functions as a strong reference when seeking explanations to certain social processes. The empirical research in the literature review provides additional reference as I conduct fresh sociological research that is located within prior scholarship in the areas of education, culture, the arts, youth and communities. With theory and prior research in mind, I anticipate that Oddfellows is an environment where students have well-developed peer networks and support from faculty and staff, elements that contribute to an ample presence of individual and collective social capital. I imagine Oddfellows to institutionally function as a public good for members of the Oddfellows community, as well as the larger Middletown community. I also expect to see the playhouse operating as a dynamic cultural field where capital is freely activated and transmitted to students, faculty, and staff. I anticipate the playhouse's programming to be varied and encompassing, seeking to be culturally relevant to all students enrolled in its programs. I foresee the troupes program to adopt a hybrid approach between concerted cultivation and achievement of natural growth, translating to an environment where students most likely engage in diverse cultural activities while also allotting time for child-initiated activity. With regard to adult-student interactions, I think that in general circumstances there would be a relatively soft boundary line between adults and students, giving students the ability to communicate and voice criticisms freely.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This ethnography is based upon a triangulation of methods including interviews with members of the Oddfellows community as well as a series of documented and un-documented participant observations conducted over three and a half years.

My relationship with Oddfellows began in the fall of 2005 as a Wesleyan work-study student in the neighborhood troupes teaching assistant position. This position required me to come to the playhouse, usually once or twice a week, to assist in the instruction and operation neighborhood troupes classes. As a teaching assistant I would do things such as: co-plan curriculum and activities with the troupe leaders, ride and monitor behavior in the transport van that picks up the troupe students from their houses, oversee classroom behavior, participate / assist students with activities, prepare snacks for the students, and other miscellaneous support. After spending time working with various groups of students, faculty members, and staff, I became intrigued by the mission of the playhouse as well as social dynamics that took place inside of it. It always seemed like something special was taking place within the organization, but I wasn't quite sure what it was, some magic formula that kept students, faculty, and staff alike coming back to the playhouse for more. It became clear that if I wanted to know more about the space: its history, its operation, its networks, its relevance to the community that I would have to do some sort of sociological research.

In the fall of 2007, I was able to begin my research process with a mini-ethnography of the playhouse during the qualitative research unit of my sociological analysis class. This small-scale ethnography attempted to gain an understanding of the social world of the playhouse by studying the operation and transmission patterns of social and cultural capital within the playhouse's neighborhood troupe's program. I did not want to research a program that was solely focused on imposing a high-arts agenda on its students, or was a professional arts conservatory. Instead, I wanted to study an institution that balanced its focus on the spheres of education, the arts, and social justice; since Oddfellows directly targets each of these elements in the neighborhood troupes program, it made most sense to concentrate my study on it.

The biggest impediment to this early research was a significant time restraint; I had less than three weeks to conduct my research, which resulted in a limited number of interviews and observations. Nevertheless, I was able to witness and take note on some of the daily practices, the social dynamics, and make some conclusions to the presence and transmission of cultural and social capital to the students who attended the neighborhood troupes program. The most significant piece that I was able to extrapolate from this study was that Oddfellows was a place that not only offered arts education to students, but it was a place where students could benefit from rich social networks, feel supported, and learn more about themselves.

This particular study will pretty much pick up where I left off from my earlier research, except this time it includes ten consecutive weeks of documented observations and six interviews. Through these early work and research experiences, I've been able to maintain positive relations with the playhouse, which has facilitated a smooth entry into the field as I conduct research for this larger scale study. I acknowledge that my prior familiarity with the playhouse staff and students in the troupe's program poses a certain level of bias as I gather data, make observations, and draw conclusions. This bias may or may not have affected the content and quality of responses that I obtained from respondents during interviews. Also, since I have in some cases developed relationships with some of the respondents, I run the risk as a researcher to misrepresent or skew the data I acquire. While I certainly don't intend on doing this, this information bias should be presented to the reader.

Before conducting research for this study, I drafted a proposal that outlined my research intentions for the study. I ran this proposal to the artistic director of the playhouse as well as the neighborhood troupes director. Also I drafted a separate human subjects proposal of the study to the Wesleyan Institutional Review Board for approval. After getting clearance from the playhouse's administration and the IRB, I began planning my schedule for observations and interviews.

### *Observations*

I decided to conduct half of my research as a participant observer, spending the majority of my time participating and observing the activity of the Chatham Court Tiny Troupe for children ages 4-9 on a weekly basis for ten weeks. I decided to concentrate my research on this particular troupe because of the familiarity the students had with me from the previous year would give me a chance to cultivate a more longitudinal set of data rather than just cross-sectional fragments. As a participant observer, I balanced working with the students as if it were a typical day of class along with taking breaks to solely observe activity and interactions that took place in the classroom. Once each troupe session culminated, I would type a final version of the field notes for my observations for that day.

### *Interviews*

The subjects of my interviews were individuals who were insightful to the history, operation, and programming of the playhouse (see Appendix A). I sampled these subjects by initially consulting the director of the neighborhood troupes program and asking her to identify individuals whom I should interview. She thought it would be best if I drafted a statement regarding the intent of my project, so that she could forward it along to members of the Oddfellows community. Once I received responses from interested participants, I set up individual interview appointments with them. Before each interview, participants read and signed human subject consent forms. All

participants agreed to have their names and the name of the playhouse identified in the contents of this study. I conducted each interview with a guided set of questions (see Appendix B), however depending on whom I was interviewing at a given time and their relation to the playhouse I would adjust the interview questions accordingly. Even though the interviews were somewhat structured, I did make it a point to have the interviews flexible by incorporating open-ended questions.

### *Design*

This ethnography makes use of the extended case method (Burawoy 1991). The extended case method analysis is used when analyzing the effects of macro level structures on micro level processes. It also seeks to examine macro theories and scrutinize how they influence micro processes, as well as indicate how micro processes causes one to critique macro theories leading to a reconstruction of existing theory. In this case, I am using the macro theories of social and cultural capital, two keystones of sociological thought, and applying them to the micro level situational processes that occur within Oddfellows playhouse and troupes program to ultimately reconstruct aspects of capital theory. I utilize the uniqueness of the activities, experiences, and individuals of the playhouse to elucidate societal significance. Social capital theory will provide a sociologically rooted lens as I analyze the social value of the playhouse on the institutional level, specifically observing the various social networks present and larger social structures.

Cultural capital theory, on the other hand, will serve as a strong sociological reference point as I analyze the content and programming of the playhouse and its effects upon the individuals. While doing this application of theory into practice, I intend to be extremely mindful and critically objective of each theory, identifying each theory's strengths and weaknesses. I will constantly use each theoretical concept as a frame of reference whenever I conduct observations or interviews with playhouse students, parents, faculty, staff, and alumni as I attempt to gain a thorough understanding of the sociological impact of community youth arts centers on individuals and the community at large. It is important to keep in mind that the extended case method isn't perfect due to its low generalizability, specificity to micro level processes, and ahistorical structure. Despite these limitations, the extended case method is the best method for this study since it allows for social theory to be considered and expanded upon in diverse contexts.

Once all of my data from interviews and observations are gathered, I hope to make conclusions that keep the integrity and best intentions of the institution and the subject population in mind. In the entire process, I will be extremely mindful of the biases that I may have as a college student, researcher, and playhouse teaching assistant before I synthesize and make claims on the data. By and large, I want this study to be an accurate depiction of the lives, creative ambitions and accomplishments of all individuals who are affiliated with the playhouse.

## **DESCRIPTION of SETTING**

Oddfellows overflows with energy, energy that runs down the halls, bounces off of every corner in the classrooms, and finally makes its way to the stage on performance day. Students are most energetic whenever they enter the space. From the minute they step off of the bus, the students can hardly contain themselves; they enthusiastically dash toward the classrooms running, jumping, and bouncing along the way. It seems as if the students catch some sort of “Oddfellows” bug, a bug that facilitates entry into the magnificent world of arts, self-expression, and social bonding. Whenever I enter the space, I find it hard not to be overcome by such raw energy. Even on the days when I’m most lethargic, I find that after spending just a few minutes in the playhouse my energy level and spirits are boosted tremendously. Perhaps this energy is what keeps people coming back to the playhouse for more for over thirty years. Oddfellows prides itself as being a community arts center that is dedicated to promoting the growth of young people--in skills, knowledge, and self-confidence--through the performing arts (Oddfellows website [www.oddfellows.org](http://www.oddfellows.org) 10/17/2008). This mission is by no means a simple one, as it involves many elements and multiple individuals.

### *What Does Oddfellows Do?*

Oddfellows is a place that serves more than one purpose and produces more than one service. While it most obviously serves the external



purpose as a community youth theater where a full season of plays are shown to the public yearly, the playhouse carries on other purposes in the realms of after-school education and social service. In a given afternoon, there can be upward to five educational classes taking place (tuition based courses and the neighborhood troupe sessions), in addition to rehearsals for main stage shows, and miscellaneous program activities. All of that translates to a constant and diverse flow of individuals entering the playhouse each day, each seeking to gain something different. Students enter an environment where values such as cooperation and teamwork are stressed and where artistic and life skills are cultivated. (Oddfellows Playhouse [www.oddfellows.org](http://www.oddfellows.org) accessed 10/17/2008). Dominick, the managing director, discusses the hybrid features of the playhouse:

We are sort of a hybrid organization a cross between an arts organization, and educational organization, and a social service agency. I think that with the population we serve and try to intentionally include in our programs, we are much more than arts. It is about youth development, helping to raise kids, and empowering kids, and being a force in the communities that we work in to work for positive change. We have a really good relationship with a lot of the populations we serve. I think we are seen as something different, than the typical social service that comes in and dictate to people how to live their lives. We are really focused on the kids and the kid's experience and all of the challenges they face, and we try to work with what we got.

Oddfellows has received recognition for its services including the 1998 Award of Excellence from the New England Theater Conference in recognition of its outstanding contributions to youth theater and education, as well as the 1999 Middlesex County chapter NAACP Community Service Award in recognition of its years of commitment to the young people of the county, particularly

those whose growth and development are challenged by poverty (Oddfellows Playhouse [www.oddfellows.org](http://www.oddfellows.org) accessed 10/17/2008).

*More about the Neighborhood Troupes Program*

The neighborhood troupes program offers free weekly after-school classes to young residents of Middletown's North End neighborhood as well as residents of Maplewood Terrace and Chatham Court public housing complexes. The troupes program is divided into three levels: tiny troupe for ages (four-nine), junior troupe (10-14), and senior troupe (14-18) with each troupe consisting of 10-15 students. The program gives students the opportunity to learn a variety of artistic, self-awareness, and life skills. Each week, the students have the opportunity to interact with each other and develop general life-skills under the guidance of a troupe leader and Wesleyan work-study students/volunteers. Students develop artistic skills through a diverse rotation of workshops run by professional artists that are intermingled into the program calendar. Workshops include, but are not limited to, instruction in the visual arts, music, dance, poetry, and theater. Each troupe rotates between two-three workshops in a given year, giving students exposure to multiple art forms and contact with multiple working artists. This format was chosen strategically, after realizing that students were less engaged and enthusiastic about devoting all of their time to studying theater. Dominick elaborates:

Kids do best when they are doing something that they are interested in and they felt like they were getting better at...So that is why we give them a selection of multiple things. We used to do a lot more of just

theater, and we noticed that the threshold was very tough. We spent a lot of time fighting to just get kids to even participate. It is such an abstract discipline in some ways. It is really delayed gratification to get kids to work on a show and stay focused. It is really hard to conceptualize if you haven't done it before. However, if they come in to work on mask or a picture for a couple of weeks it is easier to engage them.

The program strives to be mindful and celebratory of the cultural heritages of the many students who attend. This means working to have a diverse set of staff and artists who work with the students, as well as diverse programming and artistic material. Jeff, the artistic director of the playhouse, shares his feelings and experiences regarding this matter:

We've selected an art form that has been traditionally a white man's art form, and I am painfully and consciously aware of that. As a producing artistic director I make conscious choices to make sure our programming is far more diverse, and bringing voice to voices that make have been silenced or not traditionally heard... The good fortune with this organization is that since we aren't dependent upon box office revenue, we have the liberty to tell broader stories from a diversity of cultures...that other organizations may not be able to touch. Not too long ago we did a production, *Nuevo California* a play about U.S./ Mexico immigration by a group named Culture Clash... I called them and said this is what we are doing, this is what we are about, this is why I want to do it. And they we like sure... kids..Connecticut... normally we would say no, sounds cool go for it. And it was great, we told a very important story. This is not to denigrate the stories that have been dominated by white men, but there are so many other stories out there. It is taking a while for people to realize that these stories are just as vital and applicable to everyone.

While Jeff shares this interesting piece, during my time of observation, Oddfellows' play season wasn't particularly culturally heterogeneous. The fall 2008 season consisted of productions of *Hamlet*, *Mere Mortals*, and *The Threepenny Opera*, plays that were all written by white male playwrights. The troupes program, nevertheless, has more success achieving artistic

heterogeneity in the troupes program, through its inclusion of the workshop rotation that explores a variety of artistic areas such as hip-hop, break-dancing, and mask-making. In January the playhouse also executes a diversity initiative with its annual Martin Luther King celebratory performance.

The program also does its best to facilitate ease in accommodation and accessibility by offering program participants snack during each troupe session and free transportation between their homes and the playhouse. Besides the weekly meetings, students in the troupes program also participate in off-site field trips, community service projects, and other social events and activities. The troupes program culminates at the end of each semester with a “share-day” event, where students usually perform or exhibit their work to the larger Oddfellows community including parents, staff, and other Oddfellows students.

*Who are the actors?*

*Administrators.*

Oddfellows would not be able to function without the contributions of its managing director, Dominick, an extremely dedicated and compassionate individual who relentlessly works to ensure the smooth operation of the institution. This includes handling most of the non-artistic aspects of the playhouse, such as meeting with the board of directors, meeting with members of the community, being the fiscal agent that keeps charge of the grants, budget reports, and operations. Dominick points out, however, that his

responsibilities are far reaching and unpredictable “Sometimes I even do emergency graphic design...everything is fair game. Everyone who works at Oddfellows wears many different hats”. It doesn’t take long to figure out that this statement is overwhelmingly true for most of the individuals who work at the playhouse.

Dominick spends a good portion of his time working closely with the playhouse’s busy yet amiable artistic director, Jeff. He is responsible for all programs and activities that the playhouse sponsors on and off site, including overseeing the neighborhood troupes program. In doing this, he must be informed of what goes on in each of the playhouse’s programs and must manage all contracted artists and program staff. Additionally, he spends time looking for new programming initiatives and building relationships with partners. The playhouse seeks direct partnerships with schools in the Middletown school district, as well as other surrounding community based social service organizations, specifically working with MIAC-Middletown Interagency Cooperation, The Children’s coalition- a group of concerned community members who speak on issues on behalf of children, the Impact for Middlesex hospital-a group that provides immediate psychiatric care for children, and the North End Action Team-a neighborhood empowerment and revitalization group.

The Director of After-School programs, Bobbye, manages all of the playhouse’s after-school educational and social justice programs, including the neighborhood troupes program. In this demanding position, she is the

administrator who directly organizes the tuition-based classes and troupe programs by working closely with the hired faculty and contracted artists who work with the students. Bobbye is an extremely approachable and compassionate administrator as she spends a good portion of her time working directly with students either as a troupe leader or informally mentoring students. Bobbye is just one of the many administrators of Oddfellows who employ a “student comes first” mindset to work.

Other equally important administrators include: the transportation associate, who transports students to and from the playhouse; the technical director, who is responsible for orchestrating all technical components (lighting, sound, set construction) for the playhouse performances and events; and the development director/pr coordinator, who is responsible for acquiring the necessary funding for playhouse programs, as well as spreading the word of Oddfellows to the community.

### *Troupe Leaders.*

Troupe leaders are the staff members who have most consistent contact with the playhouse students. The troupe leaders are responsible for preparing an agenda for each troupe meeting, functioning more or less as a cross between a teacher and a camp counselor to the students. Some troupe leaders encourage activities that promote communication and self-awareness in fun ways. One troupe leader, Erin, explains how she has her students do things such as keep journals and create identity boxes of themselves so that they get comfortable speaking and sharing parts of themselves with one

another. Erin admits that she tries not to get discouraged when her activities that she plans for the students go a wry, and realizes that adaptation is a key component of the job. Another troupe leader, Missy, candidly shares that during each troupe session, “you hold your breath, say a little prayer, and then you are good to go!”

*Wesleyan students.*

Each troupe leader receives weekly assistance from one to two Wesleyan troupe assistants who are either volunteers or are employed as work-study students. Troupe assistants are responsible for: co-planning curriculum and activities with the troupe leaders, preparing snacks for the students, riding and monitoring behavior on the transport van that picks up students from their houses, monitoring classroom behavior, participating with/assisting students with classroom activities, and other miscellaneous support.

*Students.*

A typical Oddfellows student is difficult to describe. Students are both young and old, amateurs and experienced, and come from all different walks of life. Students, by and large, are from different communities within central Connecticut, comprised of different racial/ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. According to the Oddfellow’s website, the racial demographic nature of the students who attend the playhouse is approximately 60% Caucasian and the remaining 40% are African American, Latino, or Asian. In terms of geographic distribution, 64% of Playhouse students are from

Middletown, the remaining 36% are from 24 separate school districts in central Connecticut. Approximately 10% of the youngsters have special needs (Oddfellows Playhouse [www.oddfellows.org](http://www.oddfellows.org) 10/17/2008). The neighborhood troupes program is less heterogeneous, where students are majority black and come from low-income public housing units/communities in Middletown and Portland.

While students who attend Oddfellows have the opportunity to cultivate a strong artistic skill set via the instruction of a talented group of contracted artists, many don't come to the playhouse just for that purpose. Students often come for the opportunity to develop personal life skills and social networks in a supportive space that they may not be able to develop elsewhere. Bobbye explains further:

You can come here and have a great time and be involved in Oddfellows programs from the time you are six until you are twenty, and have no aspirations to become a performer... and there is a really important place for you here...you can also come and learn amazing skills and get amazing knowledge and work with amazing artists, and know for the rest of your life that you want to be a performer... and this place is just as much yours. We really are not limiting ourselves to one group of people. Instead we try to create an environment that includes everyone.

As Bobbye discusses, there is great diversity in the type of students who attend. Many of the students are long-term attendees. In a few instances, individuals who were once students in the playhouse's programs, come back to the playhouse as faculty and staff members. It is quite clear that Oddfellows functions as a second family for many of the individuals who attend.



## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### *Recruitment Day at Chatham Court Terrace*

On a late September afternoon, Missy, the Chatham Court tiny troupe leader along with Susanna and I, the troupe assistants, drive into Chatham Court to recruit students for the program. As we drive cautiously into the forty-unit housing complex, I notice the curious looks on many of the neighborhood children's faces, many of whom are occupied riding their bikes and playing games of tag and football. In many ways the scene I encounter at Chatham Court exemplifies Lareau's concept of achievement of natural growth, with the high presence of child self-organized activities (2003). It is clear that the children are squeezing as much summer outdoor bonding time with each other before the weather begins to chill into autumn. Some of the children immediately stop what they are doing and start following the car. I wave to them, wondering if some of them actually recognize us from last year. As I step outside of the car, the small sea of children greets us eager to know what we were doing there and what was going on. Missy explains to them that Oddfellows is starting again and that we've come to get permission from their parents so that they can begin all of the fun. After hearing Missy's words, their curiosity quickly transforms into excitement, as I notice their smiles and widened eyes.

The recruitment process essentially entails the three of us knocking door to door of the forty-unit housing complex, explaining the elements of the neighborhood troupes program and asking each family if they would be

interested in signing their children up for it. As I knock on each door, I can't help but notice the beautiful flower gardens and the festive Halloween decorations adorned to many of the resident's units. The majority of the families I encounter are quite familiar with the neighborhood troupes program as they fill out the permission slip for their children to return without hesitation. A few parents express disinterest in the program; one parent heatedly mentioning how her child who is white, felt singled out on the program that is comprised of majority black students, and did not want her child to participate in such a program again. Before I get a chance to even discuss the issue further with the parent, she slams the door in my face. Despite this one account, recruiting children from Chatham Court is quite successful. The children did not seem too disturbed by the fact that we disrupted their self-organized games of tag and football. By the end of the day, we were able to recruit 17 students, three of whom are new students, the others returning.

### *Typical Day and Structure of Troupe*

In order to get a better understanding of what exactly goes on in the neighborhood troupe program, I will layout and explain a typical day of the Chatham Court Tiny troupe from start to finish. This will allow us to get better acquainted with the actors, activities, and structure of the program.

*Rough Breakdown.*

- I. Students arrive to troupe
- II. Opening activity-snack, circle time
- III. Main activity-Variation of artistic games and projects
- IV. Closing-Clean up/rewards
- V. Students leave for Chatham Court

*Opening Activity.*

The students arrive to class along with Susanna who “shotgunned” to their homes in Chatham Court; picked the students up from their homes, and rode along with them back to the playhouse while monitoring their behavior. The students enter the room in a chaotic exuberance, pushing and shoving each other to grab a cup of pretzels and animal crackers as if it were a rat race. Susanna and I do our best to subdue their frenzy by suggesting that they sit and eat their snack in a circle with their legs “criss-cross applesauce”. On this day the group troupe consists of six boys and five girls, nine black, one Latino. Missy officially starts the class off by asking each student to state one good thing that happened to them during the day, if the student successfully shares an activity he/she receives a “froggy point”(The froggy point system is a reward system where students who complete a task or display good behavior are eligible for a froggy point. Students who have at least three froggy points are rewarded a prize at the end of class. Prizes usually consist of pencils, stickers, play-dough, candy). This ritual activity allows each student to take a moment to reflect and to practice his or her communication and listening skills. Students share things such as “ getting a sticker from a teacher” to my “mom bought me a video today”. This activity tends to be a challenge for some of the students, as a few have difficulty

listening to others. This difficulty is most likely linked to a student's eagerness while given the opportunity to speak and tell a story that they cannot focus their attention on anyone else. Once this activity is complete, Missy introduces the visiting artist who explains the artistic project for the day.

*Main Activity.*

On this day, students are asked to create their own paint by crushing and grinding fruits and vegetables with stones and sticks. Once students create the paint, they are asked to draw paintings with it. As students begin to work on their projects, Susanna and I walk around the room to attend each student individually and monitor each student's progress on the project. I immediately notice the variation of student engagement levels to this project. While some students are working away conscientiously, others seem quite disengaged with the project. This is evident by two boys abandoning their projects and initiating a game of tag in the corner of the room, this game of tag quickly transforms into a small fight. Susanna immediately breaks the boys apart and takes them outside for a time out to reasonably discuss their behavior.

As students begin to finish their painting projects, a group of three other students decide to leave the classroom and run up and down the hallways. This is not an activity that's condoned by Missy or Oddfellows. I quickly run outside and inform the students that they must stop what they are doing and return to the classroom. It becomes quite obvious that the students have a lot of physical energy that they are yearning to unleash. Another thing

I notice is that students are choosing to partake in activities where they are socializing with each other; building new social networks or reinforcing preexisting ones they have from home.

*Closing Activity.*

In order to structure the rest of the troupe time, Susanna proposes a game of red-light/green-light to the troupe, a physical game that happens to be one of the student's favorites. For a short period of time it allows them to channel all of their physical energy into a structured friendly competition. At this time, Bobbye walks into the classroom to say hello the students and to observe the activity. She spends no more than five minutes in the classroom; has a brief conversation with Missy, and then leaves to attend administrative matters in the office. The students and I continue to play the red-light/green-light for the remainder of the troupe, until Missy announces cleanup time.

Missy, the visiting artist, Susanna, the students, and I equally contribute to the cleanup process. After students clean up, Missy announces that it is "froggy point" time, where students who have earned at least three "froggy points" are eligible for a prize. On this day, all of the students are eligible for two prizes in Missy's goody bag. Once students have collected their prizes, they are asked to gather their belongings, line up, and walk to the bus to go back home.

## *Elements of Social Capital*

### *Peer Networks.*

As I continued spending time with the tiny troupe, I couldn't help but notice the development of social networks that students cultivated between each other. The majority of the students enjoyed socializing and playing games. Troupe rarely went without students playing their self-initiated games of tag. There is no doubt that the Chatham Tiny students had a certain familiarity with each other that is derived from their interactions in their home and school environments. This familiarity was something that definitely affected the social activity and interactions that occurred during troupe. About four of the students in the group also participated on a school football team, so often times when they entered troupe they spent a good portion of time talking about football and trying to act out scrimmages. On another occasion, I heard one student vocally express his disapproval of another student because he didn't like the fact that the other student had stolen his bike from his house. While this situation did not manifest into a physical altercation, there were multiple instances where students became rather physical with each other, instances where students attempted to hit or kick each other. These common instances of roughhousing never manifested into any serious injury. Despite these occasional instances where students engaged in negative social interactions, most of the peer-to-peer interactions I observed in the Tiny Troupe classroom were considerably positive and harmonious. Bobbye discusses her experiences and opinion on this issue:

In my six years I can only think of maybe one or two instances of negative relations. We had some kids who came together to do a play and they had some cultural differences, on the lines of you are not black enough/ you are too black disputes. We did our best to address that situation. It ended in them coming to develop some mutual respect and understanding. Another instance was when two young people started dating, and it was a very rollercoaster love situation. Something that is inevitable in many teenaged environments.

Mariah, a long time participant in the neighborhood troupes program, who now works part-time in the Oddfellows office, shares her experiences with her peers in the program:

Everybody gets a long. At Oddfellows its just a different feeling, when you are at home you got that home feeling, and may have that negativity. But when you are at Oddfellows and if you have that negativity people are sure to work it out with you...to make less drama, and to make your life easier.

In another interview, Dominick, who was also a participant in Oddfellow's educational programs prior to becoming a staff member, recalls similar positive experiences with his peers:

You got a real sense of a small tight knit community. I started when I was 7 or 8 and did it until I was in high school. I took classes and participated in mini productions, by the time I was in middle and high school I was in main stage shows. I enjoyed the theater and enjoyed performing, however, for me it was much more about the other students. This is where I developed my closest friends

These personal accounts reveal the ample supply of positive networks and bonding social capital over negative networks (Putnam 2000;Portes 1998).

While tiny troupe students are advantaged with sufficient opportunity to develop strong and relatively positive social networks with each other, they are somewhat limited of opportunities to develop social networks with students outside of their class. However, students in the older troupes

benefited from increased contact with students in other classes and neighborhoods. Senior troupe, for example, consisted of students from both the Maplewood Terrace neighborhood and the Chatham Court neighborhood. There are a few instances where students from the troupes program have the opportunity to participate in the tuition-based classes. There were other times in the past when these well developed peer networks worked against Oddfellows' favor. In the past, when students did not show up to troupe, it operated in a collective domino pattern, where networks of students stopped attending troupe. Mariah explains how she witnessed this pattern in her troupe:

It has mostly been the boys. Maplewood boys are so caught up in their own ways... they are like oh Oddfellows ain't doin what I like to do.. and many of them are scared to go out of their way to try something new.. they don't want to look silly in front of their friends.. and if one don't go, then another may not go. It is mostly been just the boys, but the girls are still coming strong. Another thing too, a lot of kids move out of Maplewood ... junior and tiny troupe is strong but a lot of the older kids move out.. because a lot of the parents feel like it's a bad neighborhood.. that's why I am glad Oddfellows is still here because it really gets you out of your neighborhood.

During my time with the Chatham Tiny Troupe, this domino drop out pattern did not occur. One boy stopped attending troupe as the result of another after-school conflict he had. Three other students (one boy and three girls) stopped coming as a result of being removed from their home by the Department of Child Protection Services. The remaining 12 students had fairly regular and consistent attendance throughout the semester.



### *Student-Staff Relations.*

The student and staff interactions I witnessed are best characterized as relaxed and nurturing with occasional episodes of tough love. Often when students came to class, they were eager to give hugs to Missy, Susanna, and me. Students always called staff members by their first names, which gave them the opportunity to develop a friendly and lighthearted relationship with the adults. Dominick recalls his experience with the staff as student:

Oddfellows felt like a very unique place in terms of staff/student interactions and just the value that was placed in the student's experience... Not trying to talk down to the students, but really having them bring things to the table.

As Dominick suggests, Oddfellows attempts to promote a rather egalitarian relationship between its staff and students. In this attempt, I found that some of the students became quite comfortable with the relaxed nature of relationships, which potentially lead to their difficulty in following orders and demands. A few of the students were quick to challenge adults whenever asked to do something, and interjected with phrases such as "You are not my momma". Missy never completely assumed a strict disciplinarian role, and never demanded that students do something they did not want to do. I see this as one of the challenges that Oddfellows staff often experience. By not completely taking on the authoritative adult role that students are perhaps used to in their home and school environments, some of the students didn't exactly know how to interact with Oddfellows staff. Bobbye discusses her opinion of the student-staff relationships:

I think for some of students who come to playhouse it becomes a familial relationship. In the troupes program we find that art is not the main reason why they come, it's the familiarity and comfort they receive from the adults here. We have some students that know this a place where they can come talk about their goals, their dreams, what they want to do when they grow up. They know that is a place where they can get help filling out applications for school, or discuss issues going on at home. They know that there is someone here who cares enough to listen, who will give the best advice that they have. Occasionally you have administer tough love... I guess it could be phrased in many different ways "mentor-mentee" "friend"

What Bobbye mentions above is something that I witnessed firsthand during my observations. Mariah spent considerable time discussing her post- high school plans with Oddfellows office staff. Several Oddfellows staff members, including myself, were adamant about her continuing her education by applying to college. To help her achieve this goal, staff members would have conversations with her about the college admission process, taking the SAT, and college life. Jeff even went to the extent of routinely supplying her with a list of SAT vocabulary words each time she came to work in the office. The situation above is an obvious instance where the social networks and capital at Oddfellows have the potential of being converted into cultural or economic capital and affecting long-term outcomes.

My time with tiny troupe included occasional instances where students vocally expressed their dissatisfaction with staff members and the playhouse. Students would sometimes even exclaim, " I don't like you" or "I'm not coming back to this place", while these remarks were somewhat disturbing, Oddfellows staff didn't seem to be alarmed by it. Missy explains:

Even if they say they don't like coming, they keep coming back. When they see that bus, they still get on it. They want to come here. They want to come talk to us, they want to be near us.

What Missy shares is very consistent of what I saw occur. Often the students who would vocally express that they would not return, would still nevertheless return week after week, would still take part of the classroom activity, and would still seek to develop relationships with Oddfellows staff.

### *The Cultivation of a Safe Space.*

With this incredible concern for a student's welfare and administering necessary guidance and support, many staff members believe the playhouse functions as a social "safe space" for many students. Bobbye discusses this in more detail:

We provide a safe space where a child can come, they can try new things, and meet adults who over time become people that they know have their best interest at heart. So this is a safe place, where there are over a dozen adults that want to help you. Many kids do not receive that at home, they don't feel supported. This is a place where you can feel supported...I ultimately want this to be a place where they can come and have fun, and experiences different art forms. In the troupes program we find that art is not the main reason why they come, it's the familiarity and comfort they receive from the adults here.

Erin, troupe leader of the Maplewood junior troupe, echoes this notion of "safe space":

I think Oddfellows is definitely a safe space for (students). They test you to see really how much you really care about them. I have kids who all the time say, I am not coming back here, and then I say oh no I really we'll miss you, I love having you here... and then they do come back they realize that these people really care about me.. and when I am hungry they give me snack.. and when I need to talk, there is someone there to talk to me. I mean, they are kids so very rarely they will completely come out and say I need this place or this place does a

lot for me.. but you know when they come and they seem very miserable.. or they tell me that they don't like something, but it is okay and its safe, and they still can come back and participate.

Based upon these testimonies and my observations, it seems as if this notion of a safe-space was an instrumental link for students to develop confidence and self-esteem. Over the course of my time with troupe, I witnessed students who had been fairly shy and timid during the beginning of my observations transform into more confident and expressive individuals by the end of the semester. A logical mechanism that explains such a transformation is this notion of a safe space. Troupe students knew that regardless of what they might have artistically produced, they would still receive support and acknowledgment for their efforts regardless. In such an environment, students became comfortable knowing that they had the freedom to be themselves. These conditions allow greater opportunity for a student's success; not only at Oddfellows, but potentially in other environments including schools and jobs. Younger neighborhood troupe students have the potential to follow in the footsteps of Mariah who claims that the confidence she acquired at Oddfellows facilitated her to become more outgoing and to take full advantage of the opportunities that were presented to her including applying to college. According to Dominick, It is from this place where students a provided a "window into themselves and possibilities that wouldn't necessarily have based on the situations they are coming from."

### *Community-Generated Capital.*

Jeff discusses Oddfellow's ideal relationship to the community:

Oddfellows seeks to be a part of the fabric of the Middletown community. I am going to steal one of George C. Wolfe's great statements when he said he wanted the audience to look like a New York City subway platform... and I think that is a brilliant statement of vision of who should be coming here and why should they be coming... the convergence of people. As a community organization, my version of that is we need to look like the face of Middletown, we need to serve every constituency. We have wide open doors, my job is to make them wider.

While Jeff uses the metaphor of a New York City subway platform to depict Oddfellow's ideal relationship to the community, I found elements of truth to his statement in my observations. Oddfellows is indeed the meeting point for a wide spectrum of individuals. In a typical afternoon it was not uncommon for me to encounter a diverse body of students, professional artists and arts administrators, students from Wesleyan, and Middletown residents of all ages converging in one space. This observation fully suggests the institutional presence of collective and bridging social capital (Coleman 1988; Carnoy 2007). While this evidence indicates the playhouse's function as a public good to its members I had difficulty, however, finding hard evidence that supports my hypothesis of Oddfellows functioning as a public good to the larger community. This was partly attributed to the nature of my research design, logistics, and time constraints. I ideally wanted to get a general sense of Oddfellow's relationship with other community and state institutions (e.g. other youth centers, schools, community development agencies) and members not affiliated with the playhouse to gain a fuller sense of the impact

of the organization. I wanted to understand exactly how Oddfellows was woven into the “community fabric of Middletown”, investigating how the playhouse had a stake in Middletown, and how Middletown had a stake in the playhouse. This study would have called for additional interviews and observation at other community institutions as well as survey administration to community residents. While these issues were largely beyond the scope of this study, this is an area that I would definitely suggest for future study.

### *Elements of Cultural Capital*

#### *High Art? Low Art? Cultural Relevance?*

The art activities that students engaged in were usually short term activities that allowed them to develop a basic artistic skill set and were lead by either Missy or the visiting artist. Missy typically selected art activities and games that were theater based where students exercised their creative imaginations. In my days of observation, Missy’s most common games and activities included: statues in the park- a game where one student who is “it” must turn the lights on and off, while the remaining students freeze and strike poses (often as different animals and characters) in response, another is where Missy asks students to respond to their likes and dislikes by hopping, skipping, or jumping to various points in a room. Missy also organized activities that responded to the holiday/seasonal calendar. For instance, in November students engaged in festive activities such as “pin the feather on the turkey”, a Thanksgiving version of pin the tail on the donkey, and “pass

the “thankerchief”, a game where students creatively express what they are thankful for. Missy explains what she believes theater does for her students:

I have the great pleasure in a lot ways of introducing a lot of students to theater, in particular. I feel that students are more exposed to visual arts and music, those are still a large part of the education system, but unfortunately theater has been eliminated from most programs... I feel very honored because a lot of time I may be teaching a group of kids who never have done theater before.. you know privileged in one sense and sad because I started taking classes in theater in elementary school and by the time I was high school I had taken at least four courses in theater and then was ready to major in it in college. I think students learn in different ways and I think that theater is a great vehicle to help students learn in a different way.. up on the feet, learning how to move, how to communicate..learning how to empathize.

During my observation period, Chatham Tiny Troupe students were also receiving a series of visual art lessons from the visiting artist. The visiting artist’s activities were ones in which students had the opportunity to create various small-scale arts and craft projects. Each week students had the relatively instant gratification of starting on a project and finishing it within one class period, rarely did students ever work on projects for more than one class. This was done purposely to maximize student engagement in the artistic material. Some of the art activities included: students making paint from fruits and vegetables and then painting with it, drawing self portraits, making playdoh from scratch, making sock puppets for a puppet show.

Based upon Missy’s and the visiting artist’s activities and the testimony, it becomes clear that the troupe’s program isn’t keen on forcing a specific “high-art” cultural arts agenda onto its students. Bourdieu’s and DiMaggio’s theories on cultural capital and the operation of arts consumption

seem most inconsistent with my observations and interviews with staff (1986; 1978). I found no evidence that indicated that the troupes program operated as a “field” where students entered a socially stratified space to facilitate individual cultural distinctions. Students most often engaged in activities where they had the opportunity to casually explore various artistic possibilities and to develop a set of creative skills. All of this was done in an approach where the process was valued more significantly than the product. In the tiny troupe, activities tended to be somewhat culturally unspecified, with the exception of Missy’s culturally American holiday/seasonal inspired ones. That being said, tiny troupe students received very little material that was culturally relevant to their majority working-class African American background. There was little to no acknowledgment of the class’ racial/ethnic background. The biggest disadvantage of tiny troupe students not receiving culturally relevant material is that the students risk receiving an “assimilationist” educational experience leading them getting tamed to mainstream and middle-class cultural values, without receiving an opportunity to appreciate their own cultural heritage in an artistic and educational setting. It is through this pedagogical approach of cultural relevance that students are more fully able to achieve higher self-esteem and success (Chappell 2006;Ladson-Billings 1994).

#### *Balancing Structure with Freedom.*

The troupe students entered an environment where they were exposed to some ritual and structure similar to what they might have found n their



school environments, however, were given the opportunity to have a valued voice and creatively express themselves in a relaxed setting, where they were rewarded for their attendance and efforts at the end of class. The troupe's opening activity of eating snack, sitting in a circle, and sharing a "good thing" was a routine with a clear objective of developing communication skills. Jeff, the artistic director, expresses his faith in how arts education leads children to become effective communicators:

It provides a venue for a student to voice his/her feelings and opinions, challenged when necessary, but have them voiced and not worry about a right or wrong answer

This emphasis on developing communication skills is an objective that is very reminiscent of Lareau's theoretical notion of concerted cultivation where a child's language use is comprised of reasoning and vocal expressions of opinions and feelings (2003). This concerted cultivation approach carries over to the way rules and expectations were created and followed through in the classroom. On the first day of troupe, Missy discussed the rules of troupe through the means of an interactive activity with the class. She asked students to think of rules that they would like to see in troupe, or rules that they may have experienced in another setting. Students offered things such as "be respectful to each other" and "don't hit one another". Missy applauded them for their responses and then revealed the rules for troupe on a large post-it paper. The rules were: be kind with words, keep hands to yourself, be respectful of Oddfellows building and staff, and everyone must try a new activity for at least five minutes. As it turned out, the democratic

process of electing rules was one in which students generally elected rules that they had previously experienced in their elementary school environments. I often found that the adults in the room functioned less as teachers, but more as counselors who cared more about the student's welfare and happiness as individuals rather than their ability to successfully complete an assignment. Whenever a student was frustrated or upset, Missy, Susanna or I would normally attend the student immediately to address the issue and work it out with him or her. Whenever students felt like they needed more snack, usually Susanna or I would ensure that they got more. There were other times when students would express their absolute disinterest in an activity and Missy would not demand that they participate. Students typically had the final say of their involvement in an activity, as they were never forced to do something that they did not want to do. By and large, students developed language use that was very typified of concerted cultivation, language that was full of contestations and negotiations. I definitely got the student's emerging sense of entitlement based upon their assertiveness and command of the classroom experience. Many students enjoyed running freely around the room or initiated games of tag, behavior that falls squarely under Lareau's achievement of natural growth. There were instances, however, when Missy halted this self-initiated play for fear for the student's safety. Nevertheless, students in Chatham Court tiny troupe had a considerable amount of agency and freedom to direct their time in the troupes program.

While they were offered the opportunity to engage in a range of artistic activity, it was ultimately up to them to decide the extent of their engagement.

*Discipline and Defying Labels.*

This leads me to discuss the ways in which students were disciplined in the classroom. In most circumstances, students were disciplined by receiving verbal warnings and time outs, disciplinary approaches that are once again consistent with Lareau's concerted cultivation (2003). I found that rarely did Oddfellows resort to any harsh disciplinary action for student behavior, the most extreme disciplinary action being a week suspension from the troupe. When students were disciplined, they were usually pulled aside to have a one-on-one reasonable discussion with a staff member. It's clear that this rational discipline approach was done intentionally in order for Oddfellows to be a distinguishable space from a student's school or home environment. These reasonable discussions usually entailed a staff member asking questions about the student's school and home life in order to gain a better context of a student's behavior. It was often the case that activities and conditions that occurred outside of the troupe influenced the way a student behaved during troupe. During my observation period I witnessed one extreme disciplinary case. This instance involved one male student who over the course of several troupes, acted rather aggressively towards his peers and Oddfellows staff (hitting, kicking, slapping), in addition to verbally cursing and expressing his disinterest in Oddfellows. There were a few occasions

where he would act cooperatively and harmoniously with others and be fully engaged into the troupe activities, however, his aggressive and disengaged behavior was far more consistent. In response to his aggressive behavior, Missy, Susanna, or I would usually warn him that his behavior was unacceptable and would ask him to step outside the class for a timeout. During these timeouts, he would often express to one of us how he didn't have a good day at school because he got in trouble with his teacher or complain about how he was frustrated with how he was treated at home. Since his behavior was rather consistent and didn't make any significant improvements, the three of us decided to have a meeting with Bobbye to discuss the matter in depth. All of us agreed that we did not want to see him removed permanently from the program, however, at the same time we did not want his behavior to compromise the experience of other students in the troupes program. Bobbye suggested that initiating a one-on-one mentoring program between him and an adult staff member would perhaps be the most viable solution for him. This solution, however, was not put into effect as a result of the Department of Child Protection Services removing the student from his home, which consequentially ended his time at Oddfellows. This isolated case indicates Oddfellow's unwavering faith in student potential. Even though that particular student violated numerous troupe rules, staff members seemed reluctant to give up on him and pass him off as "bad kid" Dominick offers insight to Oddfellow's approach to discipline:

A lot of these kids don't always have positive adult relationships or adult role models. Their school experiences usually entail discipline

and being the “bad kid” who gets sent to the office. We try to set up a framework where they could be successful and could feel support in a structure where we are not being totally permissive, but rather they feel like it’s a place where they can come. A lot of time they will confide in their troupe teacher or office staff about problems they are having because they feel like they are adults they can trust. That’s the community we try to create.

What Dominick brings up squarely falls under the theoretical realm of labeling theory. Labeling theory provides a potential mechanism in explaining student outcomes and success in school. Ray C. Rist explains how teacher expectations, which are usually drawn from first-hand face-to-face interactions with students or second-hand information from other sources, affect how well a student performs in school (2000). Often times teachers construct labels based upon elements of a student’s identity: including gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic status. These variables manifest into labels such as “bright”, “slow”, “trouble-maker” and “teacher’s little helper”. According to Rist, the biggest consequence of these labels is that student outcomes are subject to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where students eventually conform to the labels assigned to them. By and large, the students who receive positive labels from teachers have a greater chance of academic success than students who receive negative labels.

Over the course of my observations, I found that Oddfellows staff seemingly avoided placing negative labels on the students in the troupes program. Staff members such as Dominick, are quite aware of the fact that many of the students are labeled negatively in their school environments, which encourages Oddfellows to avoid extending such negative labels in the

troupes program. This is not to say the operation of labeling theory did not occur. Since the students are readily labeled in their external environments, the manifestation of those labels affects student behavior and experiences during troupe session. I found that the troupe students most often received positive reinforcements from staff such as “good job”, “I like the way you are doing that”, instead of being explicitly labeled as “good”, “bad”, “talented”, “untalented” individuals. Ultimately, Oddfellows wants students to feel that the playhouse is a space where they have freedom to express and define themselves without risk of being confined by labels.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### *Social Capital*

While comparing this data to my earlier hypotheses on the operation of social capital, I find that my early predications regarding the relatively high presence of bonding social capital and extra-familial social networks to be most accurate. The elements of social capital that are available in this data suggest that students in addition to staff experience well-developed social networks that are best described as positive and bonding (Putnam 2000; Portes 1998). Furthermore, the general wide spectrum of individuals converging at the playhouse to form an eclectic communal social structure indicates the institutional presence of bridging and collective social capital (Putnam 2000; Coleman 1988).

Students in the troupes program spent a considerable amount of time interacting with each other, which naturally allowed for them to develop strong peer networks. The biggest drawback of these strong peer networks was the considerably limited opportunity troupe students had in developing peer networks outside their immediate troupe/neighborhood even though Oddfellows institutionally bridges individuals of all walks of life. The exception to this is when select troupe students are awarded scholarships to enroll in Oddfellow's tuition-based courses.

Many students seemingly benefited most from an extra-familial support system with staff. This extra-familial support system is one of the fundamental elements that suggests Oddfellow's primary function as a "safe space" for

many individuals. In such a space, students and staff had the opportunity when willing to develop rich mentor/mentee relationships with each other, reciprocal relationships that gave staff the opportunity to offer support and guidance to students, and students the opportunity to associate with adults that they may not have found in their home and schools environments. Based upon conversations with program alumni, individuals in the program gained a heightened sense of comfort, belonging, and confidence during their time in the program and chose to spend much of their formative years at Oddfellows. With access to such a strong and supportive social community for such a long period of time, individuals have the potential to positively transform their lives inside outside of the playhouse.

### *Cultural Capital*

My hypotheses regarding the operation of cultural capital are somewhat consistent with my data findings. In terms of cultural programming and artistic material, I anticipated encountering a playhouse that featured a wide diversity of elements that wouldn't follow in just one monolithic cultural agenda. I thought that the playhouse would aim to give students the opportunity to explore multiple artistic cultural backgrounds and histories. While my conversations with staff suggested that Oddfellows actively pursues a multiculturalist approach to the arts, my observations of the playhouse production calendar and tiny troupe classroom activities didn't fully reflect such an approach. While this was the case during my time of observation, it



should be noted that in the past neighborhood troupe students have encountered more “culturally-relevant” artistic material including lessons in hip-hop, breakdancing, and mask-making (1994). Nevertheless, tiny-troupe most consistently engaged in artistic material that didn’t qualify under Bourdieu’s or DiMaggio’s “high-art” cultural capital theory (1984;1978). Activities such as “statues in the park” and making paint out of fruits and vegetables seemed to best facilitate a student’s exercise of self-expression, instead of gearing his/her entry into a middle/upper class lifestyle. In terms of behavior and structures, my predictions didn’t fully match my observations. While I anticipated seeing more of a hybridity of concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth approaches, my data definitely reflect concerted cultivation elements more consistently. Students time and again encountered an environment where their opinions and needs were valued. Even though students were encouraged to engage in numerous artistic activities, it was ultimately up to each student to determine the extent of his/her engagement in troupe. Students enjoyed relatively loose boundaries with staff that willfully avoided assigning labels to students. The discipline procedures most consistently included warnings, timeouts, and one-on-one discussions that emphasized a high level of student reasoning and justifications for behavior. The consequences of such a program structure and discipline system are that students largely will develop behavior patterns that are most consistent with Lareau’s concerted cultivation form of cultural capital, a form that disposes them to a middle-class lifestyle and value system

(2003). This has the capability to affect student achievement and success in schooling, considering how many K-12 schools also operate with such concerted cultivation tendencies. A potential long-term effect of this is a greater chance for upward mobility for students. However, I would argue that it is difficult to prove a causal relationship between a student's attendance in Oddfellows neighborhood troupes program leading to a student's upward social mobility. While in many ways Oddfellows and the troupes program function as an extra-familial social network for many of the students, it doesn't replace the actual family network and ties that affect an individual's cultivation and activation of cultural capital.

### *Final Words*

While the data's application to capital theory helps explain certain social relationships and processes, I would like to end this study by extending upon the theory with a critique of its limitations. The incorporation of capital theory into my study and general research of the sociology of education runs a fatal risk of only valuing educational activities and relationships as a strategic means to "get ahead" in a capitalist economic system. Fundamental to social and cultural capital theory is the potential for both capitals to be converted into economic capital. Social relationships and cultural activities become valued only for their instrumental reason and strategic efforts toward social mobility. Students as young as four years old quickly become indoctrinated with consumerist ideology, and receive educations that most

often facilitate a blinded entry into the proletariat class. Without a doubt, this operation pigeonholes the entire educational experience by extracting the joy out of learning. In many ways this recurring system reflects Marx's theory of "estranged labour", where students become alienated from their educations, and the larger capitalist mode of production (1884). Students may also develop a "false consciousness" that further distances them from their educational experiences (Lemert 2007). With an emerging false consciousness and growing estrangement from their educational experience, students ultimately approach the cold "iron-cage" of modernity (Weber 1930). In this iron-cage a student's intellectual freedom, innovation, and creativity are restricted by modern society's overwhelming obsession with rationality, a rationality that is guided by world asceticism for capitalistic pursuits, rather than for spiritual or subjective meanings. Educational environments that operate in such a rigid and harsh iron-cage system tragically fail students, by stunting their potential for intellectual, social and emotional growth. Community youth art institutions like Oddfellows, however, function as a meaningful alternative to these iron-cage educational institutions by allowing individuals to learn more about themselves and the world, while simultaneously developing meaningful relationships with others for the pure sake of having meaningful relationships. These are the special benefits of the institution that social and cultural capital theories do not fully explain.

While examining the micro case of Oddfellows and its troupes program, we also begin to understand the societal significance of arts

programming and institutions in society. Too often arts programs in this country are under-funded and undervalued, and only seen as the tangential dessert of American society. Several Oddfellows staff members mentioned how operating on limited funds and resources was the biggest challenge they faced in their position. Without the arts, many individuals lack the opportunity to release their imaginations and to develop personal and interpersonal consciousnesses (Greene 1995). Community art institutions like Oddfellows urgently fill the institutional gap for many individuals seeking alternatives to constraining educational and social institutions (Heath 1999). Filling this gap is absolutely critical for many racially and socio-economically marginalized individuals whose institutional experiences have been tainted by exclusion, negative labels, and neglect. The neighborhood troupes program actively pursues this piece of social justice by giving the most deserving students the opportunity to succeed. Bobbye shares how the playhouse has modeled itself differently from other community youth institutions, which she believe has contributed to its success:

I think that is why we have lasted longer than other youth community centers...some centers have great ideas and great intentions but they are unable to sustain. I think our unique philosophy has contributed to this. We are not a typical youth theater, we are not trying to turn out the next set of Broadway stars, we are trying to be a place where students come, they learn, they grow, and most importantly have fun.

As Bobbye suggests, Oddfellows adopts a philosophy where there is ample room for creativity, self-expression, and growth instead of the promotion of elitism, narcissism, and commercialism that are often characteristic of many high-art institutions. Perhaps it is in the realm of such a community youth arts

center, where students and staff alike become aware of the endless possibilities in art and in life. As students become more self-expressive and self-confident in such programs, there is potentially no limit to what they can accomplish. Considering all of these benefits, community youth arts centers need to be safeguarded from budget cuts and program eliminations, so that they will continue to provide numerous critical social services to individuals and communities. I hope that this study has begun to make a case for the socially transformative power of the arts and has brought to light the various social functions the arts have in education and in society.

When individuals come together at Oddfellows, it is very similar to what Durkheim speaks of when he articulates his theory of the “moral bond of collective life” (Lemert 2007). Oddfellows is a perfect case of a community youth arts center that provides social order and resistance to an anomic meltdown. Many of the individuals I interviewed and observed basked in their greater sense of purpose and collective consciousness. In a society where money, consumption, and greed have been the social order for so long, institutions such as Oddfellows provide larger society with a new social order, an order reminding us of the simple and effective powers of art, self-expression, and community.

## **APPENDIX A: LIST of INTERVIEWEES**

Allen, Jeffrey-Artistic Director of Oddfellows Playhouse

Grant, Dominick-Managing Director of Oddfellows Playhouse, Alum

Knoll,Bobbye-Director of After School Programs

Knoll, Erin- Maplewood Middle Neighborhood Troupes Instructor

Perry, Mariah- Neighborhood Troupes Alum, Office Assistant

Waryas, Missy- Chatham Court Tiny Troupes Instructor

## **APPENDIX B: LIST of INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### General/Background:

How long have you worked at Oddfellows?

What is your prior involvement in arts education?

Have you worked at any other community based service organizations?

Tell me what you do on a typical day at Oddfellows?

### Arts Education:

How does the playhouse select the artistic material for the students?

How would you describe most children's prior exposure to the arts in the troupe?

What do you believe the arts do for the children who attend the troupe?

Do you believe that exposure to the arts produces higher levels of achievement or growth?

### Community:

How would describe the social networks that students develop in the neighborhood troupe program?

What do you think the impact of those social networks is on the student?

How would you describe Oddfellows' relationship with the surrounding community?

How does the community affect the programming and services the playhouse provides?

Do you see Oddfellows as a form of social service to the community?

If yes: What type of social service?

### Exit:

What is the biggest challenge you face in your position?

What would you like to see improved in the neighborhood troupe's program?

Any additional comments

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