Life History and Identity

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Manuel and I are sitting in my office on a Saturday afternoon. We have had meetings about every other week for over a year; we also email one another almost every day. He sits comfortably in the blue suede chair and instant messages a friend as I call up his grade sheet for the quarter. Midterms are in, and he has gotten an A, a B, and a C that he hopes turns into a B because of the curve. He is disappointed with the C in science, and we are trying to figure out how to improve his study skills as the term rushes to a close.

“The courses, they are difficult,” he says. “Not too difficult, but a challenge. It’s a lot of material. I over-studied, I think.”

We talk about various strategies he might employ to take better notes and use his time more efficiently. I tell him I know he is working very hard and he nods, “Yes, I am. More than the others. More than Oscar. I don’t fool around. Not too much.”

Oscar is Manuel’s roommate and friend from high school. Like Manuel, Oscar is Latino and a first-generation college student. They have had ups and downs during the year, usually centering on Oscar’s tendency to bring his girlfriend into their dorm room. Manuel had better grades than Oscar in the fall, and we attribute it to Manuel’s focus.

“He fools around too much; he doesn’t study. But he’s very smart. If he studied he’d do well,” says Manuel.
I ask what he means by not fooling around “too much,” and he smiles, “We stay up late. I can’t study all the time. I chill with friends. We go to fraternity parties sometimes, other things.”

I frown when he mentions fraternities, and he shakes his head. “I go, yes. But I don’t drink, don’t do drugs. I used the beer bong last time.”

I am about to interrupt him and he laughs, “I held it. I held it for the others. Not for me.”

He is five feet six inches and has not grown an inch in a year. He is troubled by his size and lack of facial hair. We measure his height every few months, and each time he is disappointed. “I will never grow. Never be tall.” His discouragement is moderated by a degree of levity. His email and password use “Manuelito,” an acknowledgement that he is short. His MySpace account lists his height as six feet. When I mention that to him he laughs, “Yes! Six feet! It’s a goal. Oscar teases me about it.”

He is also thin, weighing barely 140 pounds. After he posted his photograph on his Facebook page, Oscar told him he looked like he was 11. Manuel removed the photo. Now he sighs, “I look too young. Even my younger brother, now he looks older than me. He’s six feet! I’m never going to grow.”

Like most teenagers, I suppose, he is self-conscious about his looks and nervous about various aspects of his personality, but he also is comfortable with friends and the people he meets. He does not have many close friends, but he also has no problem talking with other students, especially if they are Latino. “We have things to talk about,” he explains. “Food, girls, soccer.”

Soccer is his passion. His password on Facebook and email is the name of a famous footballer, and he plays soccer at least three times a week in pick-up games both on and off campus.

Manuel and I have developed a close relationship over the last two years, and he listens carefully to my advice about college and how to interact with professors and administrators. Some weeks ago, however, he sprained his ankle playing soccer and he had trouble walking on it. As I drove him home and we reviewed what I wanted him to do for the next few weeks, I said, “You listen to what I say and you do it, don’t you?”

He nodded. “I always follow your advice. It helps me.”

“Good. I want you to give your ankle a rest. Don’t play soccer for a week.”

He looked out the window and glanced back at me, “Some things I cannot do.”

After we talk about the strategies he might employ to do better on the science exam, we turn to this life history and its purpose. I have given him an outline of what I am thinking of writing, and I want to know if he agrees with it. “I guess so,” he says. “Some. You know me, so I guess,” and he turns away to answer a message that has come in on his cell phone.

We agree that, after I provide some background about Manuel and the structure of this life history, the story should have three parts: (a) how he has
navigated college and related topics, such as roommates, family, and money; he has been particularly worried about paying for college; (b) how he has created networks, such as the way he spends time and uses Facebook; he is mildly concerned that I have put in this section a category about sex and wonders if that is necessary or what I’m going to write; and finally, (c) how he has worked with adults in his life, such as teachers and administrators, and how that has impacted who he is. The purpose of the life history is to demonstrate how a person’s identity changes during the first year of college and how cultural and social capital function in his life.

“I think that’s okay,” he says. “These are the things we talk about. Things I think about.”

We agree that his name will be a pseudonym and that no one will see the story until he reads it. I tell him that I need him to change the mistakes I make and that if he is embarrassed by anything I will not use it. He nods and we begin.

**Relational Life History and Understanding Social Capital Purpose**

The transition from high school to college is a complex undertaking for anyone, but especially for those students who are low-income and first-generation college-goers. Their understanding of what college is about, what to expect, and how to prepare for the first term is generally low; they also attend high schools with among the lowest college-going rates in the United States, and their peers are usually not college-bound (Tierney & Colyar, 2009). Although a great deal of information has been compiled about successful retention strategies for traditionally aged students in four-year institutions, the research community does not have anything like an in-depth understanding about how low-income, first-generation, first-year students spend their time and the challenges they face because of their lack of “college knowledge” (Conley, 2005; Stieha, 2010).

One way to think about the lack of “college knowledge” is to utilize the idea of social capital. Social capital pertains to the set of resources that occur in relationships of trust and cooperation among people (Warren, Thompson, & Saegert, 2001, p. 1). The progenitor of the concept, Pierre Bourdieu (1983/1986), thought of social capital as a set of valuable connections that provides “each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to ‘credit,’ in the various sense of the word” (pp. 248–249). The underlying assumption is that networks and group affiliations are likely to have positive benefits that result in the acquisition of social capital.

The use of the word “capital” is purposeful. Just as economic capital facilitates entree into certain arenas, and human capital pertains to the skills an
individual has which provide for employment, social capital also facilitates movement, albeit with a different form of capital. Social capital pertains to interpersonal networks that provide individuals with cultural resources they are able to exploit in other areas of social life. Individuals rich in social capital have the ability to increase their economic capital. A person with little or no social capital is likely to have a harder time acquiring economic and human capital.

An elite private high school is an example of an organization that has multiple opportunities for individuals to acquire social (as well as cultural) capital. Students participate with one another in an array of college preparation activities. Visits with one’s peers to cultural entities such as museums or the theater are commonplace. Opportunities to visit historical and cultural landmarks and to travel abroad are frequently part of the norm rather than once-in-a-lifetime events, and such trips not only build up cultural capital but also help facilitate networks with one’s peers and others. Parents of the students most likely have attended college and discuss with their student which college to attend after high school graduation. One’s siblings have attended college. The school sponsors field trips to visit colleges and universities, and the teachers are versed on what students need to know in college and how best to prepare them. Summer employment is education-focused and geared toward learning opportunities. All of these examples lend themselves to social capital development. What participants in such a school see as the “norm” and implicit is absent or an exception in a low-income school.

In a low-income school such as the one Manuel attended, the opposite sort of scenario is easy to draw. As he points out in the data that follow, Fairchilds High School did not have very many discussions about college. If college preparation begins at all in these sorts of schools, it occurs in the senior year when a single college counselor will try to help 800 students choose a college and fill out applications. But even by his senior year, Manuel was still unsure about the differences between two- and four-year schools. Students do not know anyone in their neighborhood or family who has attended college. Summer employment is some form of physical labor such as in a grocery store to earn money to help the family. Visits to museums and other cultural locales are seen as time-wasting luxuries. Classes do not cover college material, and discussions about what college is about or what professors expect from students is absent.

The idea of social capital has particular relevance with regard to college-going and higher education. Bourdieu (1983/1986) noted that “the scholastic yield of educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family . . . [and] the ‘social yield’ of those qualifications turned on social capital” (p. 244). In other words, the simple accumulation of instrumental pieces of knowledge—cultural capital—was insufficient
without the networks called on to put those pieces of knowledge into play. As Erin Horvat (2001) nicely points out:

A student who gains a law degree and then enters his or her father’s friend’s prestigious law firm enacts familial social capital to convert the educational credential into a valuable professional position, and the potential for the accumulation of economic capital. (p. 211)

A student who leaves the same law school and then, perhaps due to a scarcity of valuable familial social capital, sets up his or her own small law office has converted the same credential in a different and perhaps less valuable manner. The challenge becomes how students who attend such schools adapt to college and if, while they are in college, they are able to develop social capital.

How does the lack of social capital impact one’s identity and how does identity change over the course of a year in a location that many first-generation students will perceive as foreign? Presumably, the answers to such questions will facilitate the development of strategies aimed at retaining those students who are most at risk of dropping out during the first year of college and who are also the least represented at four-year institutions.

Unfortunately, most analyses of social capital, beginning with Bourdieu (1979/1984; 1983/1986), are either abstract theoretical arguments or have not investigated the transition from high school to college with the sort of in-depth data necessary to understand how one’s identity changes over a particularly important transition point in a young person’s life. Indeed, my primary concern with Bourdieu’s very thoughtful work is that it is overly deterministic. Nowhere in his many books and articles does he present an argument where human agency is possible. Although his focus on symbolic capital distinguishes him from traditional Marxist analyses of economic wealth, in many respects he remained wedded to traditional notions of a structure that reproduced inequality rather than created the conditions for change. His work pointed out how in multiple societal domains the various notions of capital operated in a manner that maintained inequality. Thus, economic capital provided individuals with the ability to acquire cultural capital by way of social capital which in turn created human capital. All of these various forms of capital interacted with one another in a way that enabled society to reproduce itself, and in doing so, maintain inequality. To his considerable credit, Bourdieu fostered the analysis of inequality by way of more than simply economic wealth.

However, the abstraction of Bourdieu’s writing and the lack of any careful studies to test his many ideas weakened his argument to theoretical assertions that have yet to be proved. I have found his work to be extremely helpful, but the determinism of his analyses and his inability to see any human agency
seems to belie changes that have occurred in the United States over the last generation. To be sure, significant inequality exists. But to suggest that no change whatsoever has happened is to overlook simple demographics. The question is less whether change has happened, but how the forms of capital continue to constrain many, and what, if any, role social organizations have in enabling students such as Manuel to move out of poverty.

Musoba and Baez (2009) follow Bourdieu by saying: “Social capital is what comes from being in possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance, which provide individual members with the backing of the collectively owned capital” (p. 157). In effect, then, social capital confers group benefits on those who are part of the network and, in doing so, signifies that such membership is important. Acceptance to, and graduation from Harvard University, for example, confers social capital, not only by becoming a member by way of the accumulation of cultural and social capital, but also because the members have the ability to make membership important. The ability to make reproduction and domination happen, while easy to understand and see, somehow gets translated as inevitable, however, by such scholars. Musoba and Baez (2009) correctly observe that Bourdieu “would be leery of the liberal-humanist view of education so common in the US educational discourse, which presumes that schools as gateways to the professions . . . function for individual mobility” (p. 164). Yet again, because a theoretician is leery of a viewpoint neither validates nor invalidates the viewpoint. What we need, instead, is some sort of data to consider how structures function to enable or disable individuals from acquiring the various forms of capital that Bourdieu (1983/1986) has so elegantly outlined.

One way to gain preliminary information and develop hypotheses about Bourdieu’s ideas is to investigate college-going by way of a life history, or set of life histories, of first-term college students. By its very definition, those who undertake a life history neither seek to develop theoretical generalizations nor attempt to offer policy recommendations. What a life history can do, however, is offer a glimpse into one person’s life and hopefully provoke questions and ideas about how that individual lives his or her life and makes sense of it (Tierney, 2010b).

Any methodology has shortcomings, of course. I employ life history here, however, in large part because we have such limited understanding of how social capital functions in general and, in particular, in an educational organization. Bourdieu’s (1979/1984, 1983/1986) language and ideas are famously obscure and at times incomprehensible. One criticism of those who have used Bourdieu is that the scholars have had only the most meager of understandings of Bourdieu’s theoretical frameworks and instead have employed large-scale data sets and used variables that presumably have come out of thin air; they have never been operationalized or tested (Musoba & Baez, 2009). I
am less interested in rejecting or affirming other methodological studies that have used Bourdieu’s terminology and instead wish to concentrate on the utility of using a life history to gather data so that I might eventually develop workable hypotheses that surround the idea of symbolic forms of capital.

Thomas Cottle (1991) has offered a useful set of life stories about a family preparing for college. We also have seen life histories about college students (Stieha, 2010) and teachers (Muchmore, 2002). What such life histories have done is provide “thick” description, such that readers might understand a life and then try to see if various theoretical propositions make sense or not. Such is my purpose here.

In general, however, there is a paucity of life histories about the young, especially about the experiences of the young in schools and universities. Some have even suggested that life histories are intended mostly for those who are adults or even the aged, in large part because they will have a “history” to retell. What sort of history is possible for those whose lives are so short? However, Haglund (2004) has argued that life histories are particularly well-suited for questions regarding adolescent issues and that adolescents have the necessary skills, “including recall, insight, interest, and attention span,” to participate in making a life history (p. 1312). Further, as the life history here demonstrates, the young have the ability to be deeply reflective about their lives.

The challenge is to develop a relationship with them that enables individuals to speak about what they are thinking and feeling. Of necessity, such a relationship takes time, which is why a life history that extends over a year or more is particularly suited for such an attempt. Judgments about good and bad behavior also have to be made with care. As I relate below, Manuel looked to me for advice, but we often spoke about the need for him to speak to me about whatever he did or wanted to do, and my assurances that I would not rebuke him or tell others.

In an age of instant, frequently one-way communication—texting, Facebook, and the like—the life history is an opportunity for any individual, but especially adolescents, to step back and verbalize what they may be thinking about the experiences they are having or would like to have. Simply stated, different methodologies have different strengths. Surely, a sample size of one is irrelevant for suggesting large-scale recommendations. But as Hugh Mehan (1992) has noted, research of this kind has the potential to insert human agency into frequently quite deterministic theories of social inequality such as Bourdieu’s. Katherine Newman’s (1999) No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City is a useful example of how qualitative work may shed light that is not otherwise available on a scholarly topic. Accordingly, the life history that follows is responding to the call by Smyth and Schorr (2009) to rethink what constitutes “evidence” as we consider social interventions that work. Accordingly, a life history is one piece of in-depth
data that enables researchers to understand the phenomena of the first year for a low-income, first-generation student in a manner much deeper and potentially richer than simply from a survey or short interview (Tierney & Clemens, 2012).

**Method**

I was Manuel’s mentor during his senior year in high school, and I helped him apply to college. He participated in a summer writing program that I offered on my campus, and I stayed in touch with him throughout his freshman year. The nature of our interactions changed and deepened during our time together. He was initially so nervous during our meetings in the college counseling office at his high school that he trembled. Over time we have become more comfortable with one another; I usually pick him up at a park near his home and we go somewhere to talk about college and his life once or twice a month.

Speaking in person is probably my preferred style of communication (probably more than his), but we also talk on the phone from time to time or, more frequently, use email when we cannot meet. As I will discuss, he utilizes multiple strategies to communicate with his friends and family—four different email addresses, MySpace, Facebook, IM, the telephone, and face-to-face conversations.

I originally used a protocol for posing questions, and I took notes on his answers. Since he has gone to college, however, our conversations are more informal. I usually send him a list of topics I want to talk with him about, and in turn he will have questions for me. Because of the difference in our ages and our nationalities, he does not think of me as his friend nor, obviously, as a family member. He may use the ambiguous word “mentor” to describe me, but our relationship is formed in large part by our dialogues in general and by his thoughts in particular. He speaks to me on occasion about thoughts that he does not express to friends or family, and I have assured him that I will tell no one else. The point is less that he has some dark secrets that no one should know about, but rather that individuals often do not verbalize some thoughts they may have to others who see them on a regular basis and are peers or family members.

This life history, in part, has been a way for Manuel to talk about how he has been feeling over the last year, and for me to help him puzzle through not just instrumental challenges—applying for financial aid—but also interpersonal issues—what it means to be a young man from El Salvador growing up in America. His generosity with his time and willingness to speak freely to me also provided a rare opportunity to see on a daily basis the challenges that a teenager faces as he tries to make sense of college. Manuel has given me the passwords for his various email accounts; I also have read almost
all of the papers he has written for his classes, and I have reviewed his class notes. The result is that I have accumulated a great deal of data. After every interaction with him I took notes, and I developed an outline of themes that frame this paper by comparing my notes from month to month.

Manuel’s feedback has also helped me reshape my ideas and recast the life history in manifold ways. Anyone’s life history, but especially a teenager’s, changes over time. Relationships are not static and opinions change. If I had taken a snapshot of Manuel during his fall semester of senior year in high school, for example, I might have described his relationship with his mother and family in a different way than I do today. In part, my understanding has increased, but his relationships are also evolving. Whose relationship with one’s parents, after all, does not change, and yet, also stay the same?

Similarly, I was one of the first Anglo adults whom Manuel spoke to outside of the formal classroom setting. Although Manuel remains exceedingly polite to all adults, as I will discuss, he has gained enough confidence that he now interacts with numerous adults and does not hesitate to ask questions in class or by email if he does not understand a question or assignment. He may be intimidated when he walks into a classroom or a building and does not see any other Latinos, or know anyone, but that has not stopped him from asking questions or requesting advice. Thus, a strength of this life history is that I have been able to track these changes over time and also gain his interpretation of the events that unfold in “real time.”

As with any text, but especially a narrative life history, one also makes choices about the portrayal of data. In what follows, I move decidedly away from a recent tendency toward “autoethnography” (Ellis, 2004; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) or cultural biography (Frank, 2000) where the author focuses more on himself or herself and/or the relation with the subject/interviewee. Although I understand the use and utility of such narrative techniques, my focus here has been on Manuel rather than on my own interactions or my relationship to him. At the same time, unlike popular texts such as Ron Suskind’s (1998) Hope in the Unseen, I also do not portray the data as an omniscient narrator; I was an active participant.

Obviously, as with any qualitative research undertaking, my own socio-cultural background and age have impacted my relationship with Manuel. Nevertheless, the focus of the text is on the development and maintenance of Manuel’s identity as he transitions from high school to college. The result is that, as with any text, the data get presented with my voice more in the background rather than in the forefront, but my voice is also ever-present; the data did not collect themselves.

Over the last century, qualitative research has undergone a multitude of authorial and narrative experiments such that single-voice or single-technique narratives have been abandoned. Instead, authors make decisions on the sorts of stories they are going to tell and then call upon different criteria
both in the telling of the story and in ways to judge the veracity of the text (Tierney, 2010b; Tierney & Clemens, 2011).

**MANUEL’S BACKGROUND**

Manuel’s maternal grandparents first came to the United States from El Salvador several years ago and obtained their green cards. Manuel, nineteen at this writing, grew up in a working-class neighborhood of San Salvador and lived with his mother, father, and younger brother and sister. Manuel’s parents never married; and when his grandmother was able to get the necessary papers for Manuel’s mother and the three children, they also emigrated. The father had to remain behind.

Manuel was then fourteen. His departure from El Salvador, his friends, relatives, and most importantly, his father, has haunted him since arriving in Los Angeles. His first year or two at Fairchild High School were marked by loneliness and a desire to return to El Salvador. He did not speak English; and although a preponderance of students at Fairchild were bilingual, his lack of English language skills only exacerbated his homesickness. Occasionally a teacher made a derogatory comment about his poor language skills, but more often than not, people left him alone.

On occasion his father will call him but the calls are sporadic—about once every six months—and generally he asks Manuel to send him money. Although Manuel and his mother made the decision to come to the United States, he still feels bad at being separated from his father. He is close to his grandparents and enjoys spending time with an uncle who lives in another part of the city, but he is closest to his mother. She was neither for nor against his going to college, but over time she has come to admire Manuel for doing well. She sees a college degree as a route out of poverty, and so does Manuel. He has internalized the belief that working hard will bring success. Success for him, however, as I discuss below, is largely what many would think of as a working-class salary. He is unsure what sorts of jobs he can choose from when he graduates from college, but he knows he will have a better job than his father who is a day laborer in El Salvador.

In high school, Manuel developed two personalities. First, because his English skills were not excellent, he tended to be shy in the classroom, reticent to speak, but always well-behaved. Teachers liked him, not because he was the best student but because he was polite and non-disruptive; however, not many adults got to know him very well. The exception was his soccer coach with whom he created a very close relationship.

His second personality was framed by soccer. He is a good, although not superb, player. His dedication, savvy, and enthusiasm outweigh his natural ability. Soccer allowed him to have a cadre of male friends, which in turn, enabled him to interact with girls. Whereas he is circumspect with adults, he
is funny and outgoing with his friends, especially girls. “I have a good sense of humor,” he acknowledged one day. “People like it when you make them laugh. I like to tease people, too.” He has “friended” many more females than males on Facebook; the views of him range from someone who is cute to that of a younger brother.

Although Manuel thinks of himself as on the left politically, he has never attended a rally or participated in any political events. He does not remain current about the political climate in El Salvador, the United States, or his own city. He is troubled by the rising cost of tuition but he has not yet done anything other than tell me, “It’s unfair.” He likes President Obama but had a difficult time recalling the name of the vice president or of the Republican candidate for president.

Fairchild High School has a dropout rate of over 30% and a similar college-going rate. The school provides basic services and not much more, even though these are precisely the students who need additional support. He emailed me, one day, for example, “I went to a museum today! I went on a field trip to the Museum of Tolerance! I had never been in a museum before so you can imagine how amazed I was! Awesome!” When he visited my office on campus, it was the first time he had set foot on a university campus. His mother has yet to visit him at his university, and she rarely went to Fairchild. Fairchild in many ways represents a high school akin to what Croninger and Lee (2001) have pointed out as low in social capital development. Discussions about going to college are rare, and students do not receive much explicit encouragement to enroll in hard courses so they can go to a good university.

Indeed, the work that I and others do at Fairchild is an explicit way to overcome what Croninger and Less (2001) have pointed out as deficits in such schools. Low-income youth attend schools where the ability to generate social capital is virtually nonexistent in the school’s everyday practices. My familiarity with the school and the variety of options that exist for low-income youth enable students like Manuel to create forms of capital. Whether such practices can be systemic is a question to be answered in other articles, but the example here highlights how one student’s relationship with an external agent has the ability to create social capital that otherwise would not have existed; as I discuss below, the generation of social capital does not need to obliterate an individual’s identity, but opportunities exist that inevitably impact how a student proceeds in his or her career and educational future.

Most college-going students at Fairchild attend a two-year institution, and the overwhelming choice of four-year institutions is the local state university. When Manuel was admitted to a prestigious local public university, his stature among adults, family, and peers rose.

No one, especially Manuel, knew what he might encounter during his first year. Graduation from Fairchild was a fun, if slightly deflating, event. His mother and grandmother attended graduation, but because they did not
have a car and his mother needed to work, they simply returned home after
the ceremony. He spent the next few weeks playing soccer, continuing his
job at Subway as a “sandwich artist” to earn money for college, and thinking
about how his life was about to change.

Navigating College

We decide that Manuel should get a jump start on school, so he registers
for summer school; the family member who thought she could drive him to
school has bailed out on him at the last minute and I am waiting outside his
home at 6:30 in the morning. Manuel lives with his mom, his 14-year-old
brother, and his eight-year-old sister in a house with his aunt, uncle, younger
cousin, and grandparents. Manuel’s bed is in a closet in the back of the house
where he keeps his clothes, school books, and soccer ball. He has lived in this
house since he arrived in the United States five years earlier. It is close to a
park and within walking distance of Fairchild. Although the neighborhood
is in a poorer part of the city, it is also an area where many families have
at least one person with gainful employment and there are an abundance
of children. The neighborhood experiences crime—Manuel’s bicycle was
stolen from the backyard a few years ago—but more serious crimes, such
as murder, are not as prevalent as in neighborhoods that border his area.

People tend to come and go in the house whenever they want. Manuel
eats something when he gets home or goes to a friend’s house for dinner.
His mother and grandmother frequently work evenings and they are often
sleeping when he and his brother get up to go to school. When he arrives
home, he may have to take care of his younger sister or make sure she is fed,
but she is now at an age, Manuel tells me, “where she can take care of herself
unless my mother is gone a long time.”

Manuel is neither troubled by nor reflective about his living situation. He
does not bemoan his situation and knows that his mother is doing as much
as she can to provide for the family. Indeed, if anything, he wishes that he
could raise additional money to buy a car so he could drive his mother to
work or so they could drive to the grocery store rather than hauling groceri
es on the bus.

Gangs are a problem, but not a paralyzing danger in Manuel’s immediate
neighborhood. “You see them sometimes,” Manuel tells me one day, “but I
avoid them. They don’t want me, either. I’m too small.” “I am friends with
my soccer team,” he tells me on another day. “We do not join gangs.”

The house is dark when I arrive, and I see no action. He has just gotten a
cell phone after months of begging his mother to get him one, and I call his
cell. No answer. I wait fifteen minutes, call him again, and finally leave. He
calls me as I reach my office.
“I am sorry. I over sleep.”
“How are you getting to the university?”
“Bus. I’m taking the bus. It won’t be too bad.”
Manuel thus arrives late to his first day of summer school; but in the excitement of moving into a dorm and beginning college classes, his initial embarrassment is lost. I call him at the end of the first day and ask how he likes it.
“I like my classes. I will work hard to understand the material and pass them all! The food is boring.”
I have not heard from him for a few days, and I send him an email asking if he is okay. He writes back: “ Seriously, I am okay. It is a lot more stressful than I thought, but it is okay. There is a lot of reading. I am trying to get into a study group or something like you told me. I am so stressed about my reading.”
We talk about how to make sure he is prepared, and he begins to develop habits that he keeps throughout the first year. He awakes by 8:00 a.m., frequently skipping breakfast, studies in the morning, and then has lunch with Oscar or another friend. He takes classes in the afternoon, studies a bit more, and then has dinner with Oscar or someone else. He studies in the dorm in the evening and then plays soccer in a nearby parking lot. He is in bed by about 1:00 a.m.
“Things are ok,” he writes to me one day during the first week of summer school, “except my neighbor.” When I ask what the problem is he says that the guy thinks he is special—he is a basketball player—and plays his music very loud so that it is hard for Manuel to study and sleep.
Midway through summer I meet with Manuel. His appearance has changed. “You cut your hair,” I gasp.
He laughs. He used to have a head of curly black hair that he used a gel on. Now it is short, straight, and gel-less. “My neighbor. He cut it. I was chillin’ with him and he said he cut hair, so I let him. It’s better.”
Any student who goes away to an elite college is likely to change his or her appearance, but changes are particularly apparent with low-income, first-generation youth. Although students who attend a community college or state university may look like their counterparts in high school, the same is not true on leafy campuses that have long been the bastion of the upper class. Manuel looked like who he is at Fairchild—a teenager not far removed from the streets of San Salvador. But that same look stands out on a campus dominated not only by Anglos and Asians, but also by an upper-middle-class culture. The result is that, over the course of the year, Manuel has substituted the university’s array of T-shirts and hoodies that college students typically wear for the used T-shirts and wool pullovers he used at Fairchild. The soccer shorts that he wore in high school are still de rigueur; but rather than
proudly wearing the high school’s shorts, he now wears the long shorts that virtually every other college student wears.

I ask Manuel if the neighbor was the same fellow who plays loud music. He nods yes. “He’s an okay guy. We talk, chill. Not too serious about school but he’s a good basketball player. He’ll start.”

In the fall, he comes home every weekend; and we meet about every other week. By Christmas, however, he has decided that coming home is too much. “I missed stuff at school, in the dorm. And I lose time, coming and going on the bus.”

Nevertheless, during winter quarter he still returns home about every other weekend, and often looks forward to it. “Going back to the ‘hood!” he writes on Facebook, and “home, sweet, home!” another time. He spends all of Thanksgiving and Christmas break at home as well as spring break. When he is home, he visits some friends and plays a pick-up game of soccer on Saturdays, but he mostly stays in the house, does his homework, and takes care of his little sister.

His grandparents and mother work during the day and into the evening. The house often has no adult present. His younger brother and he take turns watching his sister. Over Christmas he helps a family member paint a house. He also spends a great deal of time on Facebook and listening to music.

One positive aspect of going home is that he can eat food that he likes. “The food at school, it is boring,” he says. “My grandmother, she is the best cook. Pupusas. Platanos. Arroz, frijoles. All kinds of cakes she made for New Year’s. The best!”

However much his family is a strength for Manuel, there are also difficulties. Over the course of a year, he has grown closer to his mother, and some of the tension that he had in his senior year with his family has lessened. His mother, however, is working fewer hours at her job and needs to get up at 4:00 a.m. to get to work; he now feels even worse for her and wishes he could learn how to drive so he could drive her to her place of employment—a hospital where she works as a custodian. He and his younger brother had not been the best of friends, but Manuel’s moving away coupled with his new status at a prestigious college have drawn them closer together. His aunt and uncle were difficult to live with; and now that Manuel only visits occasionally, the cramped house has additional space. His return home also is more of an event, rather than just another mouth to feed. When Manuel returns home, he has stories to tell about living on the other side of town, and he is more willing to spend time at home, especially with his little sister, to whom he is very close.

His return to his side of town also gives him a chance to take a break from what he sees as a largely White zone—his university. After he had been admitted to the university and while he was still a high school senior, I had him visit the campus. He walked around it with a friend. When he came
back, he emailed me: “My visit to [the university] was awesome! The campus is so big, and there are many students!” When I spoke with him about his visit, he also acknowledged that he had never seen so many White people in his life. “To be honest,” he says, “I think I was the only Latino on the tour. But I think it is . . . awesome! I loved it!”

He tells me one day that he is not particularly bothered by the lack of Latinos, but he notices their absence:

Whites. And Asians. Lots of them. That’s fine. Sometimes when I walk into class or into the cafeteria I don’t know anyone, there are no Latinos, just everyone talking together. But it’s fine. My friends are Oscar, some people in Hague (the dorm), and the guys I play soccer with. This one White guy, he never said anything to me and then he saw me play and now we talk. Soccer brings us together.

Although soccer may be a universal means to bring people of diverse cultures together, Manuel also spends most of his time with other Latinos. He considers joining a Latino fraternity that, he emphasizes to me, “helps one another work hard and does volunteer work in El Centro” (a Latino neighborhood). His conversations on Facebook and MySpace are often a mixture of English and Spanish. About two-thirds of his 250 Facebook friends are Latino, and a distant second are Asian women, for whom he has had a fondness.

He laughs one day:

I don’t know why. My girlfriends in high school, they were Asian chicks. The girl who broke up with me, she was Asian. My friend says I’m smart because I hang out with Asian chicks, that they’ll give me the answers to my homework.”

When he returns home, then, he is not only able to eat the foods of which he is fond, but he also speaks in his native tongue, and is around people with whom he is familiar. At the same time, he is changing. Over the course of the year, he decides to spend less time at home, in large part because he finds it easier to study at school. “I have no place at home. And my little sister, she always wants to play. I can’t study, and there are things to do. I need to plan my time better, it’s difficult at home.”

Any individual has multiple identities—race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, and the like; all intersect to make a composite individual. But at different times in one’s life, a part of his or her identity may play a larger role than another, or one aspect may be in conflict with another at one point and not later on. A closeted gay student, for example, may find it difficult to reconcile his sexual orientation with his religious background when he is in the throes of coming out; eventually he may bring both into harmony or
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some form of reconciliation. At one point, one part of one’s identity, such as gender, may be very important, and later on, of less consequence.

Manuel always has thought of himself as El Salvadoran, but he has not given much thought to what that means. Superficial, although crucial, components such as food, dress, and sporting preference are obvious code markers of one’s ethnicity. But Manuel’s ethnicity is also defined in part by his class and family circumstances. His mother makes less than $12,000 per year in her job at a hospital, and he has spent his teen years largely without his father’s presence. On the one hand, poverty has made him cautious about spending money and not entirely comfortable navigating loans, grants, and scholarship applications. On the other hand, the absence of his father has provoked questions and worries about why they are apart and whether he has done something wrong because he is in the United States and his father is in El Salvador.

Prudence Carter (2005) has maintained that all individuals have access to social capital but that how it manifests itself varies. From this perspective, if Manuel were in El Salvador he might have had access to various avenues based on his family, his neighborhood, his religion, and the like. To a certain extent, he also had such opportunities in the United States albeit they were more limited because he lived in a circumscribed area with fewer contacts because he was new to the country. However, Carter also points out that different kinds of social capital are useful in different situations; and in large part, the poor do not have access to those forms of capital that create greater economic and educational opportunities. The same might be said about Manuel.

The result is that he constantly tried to create opportunities for himself because he recognized that he was not able to call upon others to help him.

“Should I work on weekends?” he wonders early in the quarter. “This guy, he asked me if I wanted money on Friday and Saturday nights. It’s a way to make money.” He tries to save money and laughs later in the term, “I am saving some. Will [the university] take it if I don’t spend it?” He laments that a call to his father in December focused largely on money. “He asked me and my brother to send money. We can’t afford it. We sent $50.”

He writes on Facebook over a series of days about nightmares he has had; and when I ask him, he elaborates:

I dreamed my father killed me. Each night he killed me in a different way, with a gun, with a knife. Oscar woke me up, and my little sister shook me awake when I was home, because I was moaning, crying. It was terrible. I don’t know what it means, if he is okay, if he is angry.

Manuel’s student identity is deeply in conflict with his ethnic self, but he is figuring out how to integrate the two. Because many of his friends are
Latino—and in particular because he has male friends, he is very comfortable passing along comments and jokes, often crude, in Spanish. When he speaks on the telephone or instant messages with someone, he is likely to speak and write in Spanish, and much of his favorite music is what young Central Americans enjoy. This music is buttressed by American rap and hip-hop, but that, too, is emblematic of youth culture in Latin America. Manuel does not see his actions as anything other than how he has learned to live. That is, he never speaks of “the American Dream” or articulates the individualistic ideology that, if one works hard, success will follow. He did not really know about the ideology of an American Dream; he simply knew that immigrants work hard. Instead, Manuel adapts his identity to his surroundings in a manner that makes his actions and sense of self more fluid than fixed.

**Building Social Networks**

“I am sorry if I have failed!” writes Manuel. “I need other wake-up calls like this one!”

I have sent Manuel an email saying that he has missed the deadline for a scholarship application that may have provided $1,500 the next year. Manuel listens closely to me when we next meet, and I offer suggestions. We spend a great deal of time talking about how he spends his day and how he might improve his time management. I send him topics we will talk about; and then when we meet, we go over the topics. I try to get Manuel to relax and think about how his time has gone since we last met.

“Sometimes I study too much, I think,” he tells me one day after he found out he received a C. He talks me through how he tried to memorize every list that he had written in class. When I ask to see his notes, he shows me how he is doing what I suggested. I ask him to explain what he does in a class and after it:

I sit in the front of class and I take my laptop. I take notes for the class and I will ask questions. Then after class I review my notes, and write down different themes. If I don’t understand something I highlight that in blue. If I think it’s an important theme I put it in red. Sometimes I will check my notes with someone in class. Usually not Oscar. Maybe Vanessa, or someone else. One class they have me working with someone; we have partners. She’s good, but she’s not on campus so it’s difficult to get together. We email. At midterms and finals we have study groups.

I am impressed with the thoroughness of his notes and ask if he understands all this material. He nods and adds:

Machiavelli was the best reading! I liked it a lot. The history class, it’s interesting. English is not so much this time; she doesn’t care as much as the lady last quarter. Science is okay. Lots of facts. I like history!
He initially thought he might major in a science, perhaps chemistry; but his score on the math entrance exam was not good enough and he has taken a liking to history. His current plan is to major in history and focus on Latin America. “Perhaps I will be a high school teacher?” he muses one day. “Help students.”

While Manuel shows remarkable determination in his day-to-day activities, he is unclear about his future; and in part because of that lack of clarity, he has trouble thinking much beyond his midterms and final exams. Toward the end of his first quarter he writes on Facebook, “Dear God, I have done everything asked of me! I have been good! I have gone to every class and done all the assignments! Let me do good on finals!”

Manuel ends his first quarter with two A’s and a B, and he achieves the same grades for winter quarter. At the same time, his work and social plans remain vague. He goes home for Christmas and again at spring break in contrast to many other students who go somewhere with each other or perhaps go to one another’s homes. He wants to take a community college math class in the summer to get some requirements out of the way; but other than that, he is unsure what he will do in the summer. Because of budget cuts at the community college, it turns out that he cannot enroll in a summer school class.

Part of his lack of ability to make long-term plans pertains to his economic situation. Some students might be able to afford to go skiing over Christmas, but he cannot even consider such an option. The only time he has ever been on an airplane was when he left El Salvador to come to the United States. Another challenge is that he does not have many adult connections to help him with possible job opportunities in the summer or during the year. He spends time the best way he knows how, trying not to waste it. He neither drinks nor does drugs, and his leisure time is spent doing what he most enjoys—following and playing soccer. He spends about two hours a day social networking with his friends, but he rarely watches television or goes to a movie.

The larger issue for Manuel, however, is that, because he has lived in an economically depressed environment, his vision of the future is vague. He has a compelling drive to succeed and is determined not to disappoint his family. Success for Manuel means a good salary, but even the definition of “good” remains vague. Some freshmen at an elite research university, for example, say they are “pre-med” with a desire to be a medical doctor; others have had parents and siblings who have attended universities and are focused on what they want to do professionally when they graduate. Some students, especially at the elite public universities in California, also are social activists and spend a great deal of time working in that arena. Manuel, however, has not had such experiences and does not have similar connections. He does what he knows how to do, which is based in large part on his past experiences.
and environment. What he has learned is how to reach an immediate goal, and he learns by way of listening to adults like me and watching his peers.

At his public university, it is entirely plausible that Manuel can go throughout a day, or even an entire week, without any significant interaction with an adult. All but two of his classes have had over 300 students; his writing classes have “only” 40 students. The teaching assistants are graduate students who are largely uninterested in getting to know students; they view teaching a section as work for which they are paid. Their primary vehicle for communicating with students is through sporadic task-focused emails. The faculty also interacts with students by email but do not make any efforts to get to know students. The result is that, at the end of his first year in college, Manuel’s primary interaction with an individual who has a college degree is me and one person I introduced him to at his institution. He also has a work-study job but it is perfunctory; the only positive side to it is that he is sometimes able to do his homework when the office is slow.

The lack of adult supervision or interaction has not dissuaded him from communicating with many individuals in multiple formats. “I spend about two hours a day on Facebook, and MySpace, and email,” he tells me. His voice on these various media outlets is distinct, but not particularly surprising, given the audience and norms. His Facebook voice, addressed to friends, tends to have an informal, funny, macho tone to it: “Gotta love it! Free pancakes at IHOP!!” or “puta! you doin’ work? lol. that’s good bro!” or “o shit! ma bad! the red bull and lack of sleep are getting at me again. I need pazookies!” At the same time, he will write to his professor or TA: “Could you tell me please where to find the assignment. It is not listed yet.” or “Can I please know my grade for the midterm. Thank you!” or “I wanted to go to office hours yesterday but I was working. Can I please see you this week?” Manuel and I know one another well enough that he is likely to be funny or direct with me: “Help! Please look at my paper. Thank you!” or “There is a problem with my fafsa. It says I paid the wrong money. What to do?” or “The New Year’s was great! My grandmother made all these foods! They were great! But now I am sick.”

The result is that Manuel’s code-shifting enables him to reach out to adults and friends in cyberspace when those same adults or friends are not physically present. Manuel has many interactions, then, but those with adults are limited in form and content.

“I hang mostly with Oscar,” says Manuel. He has gotten to know people in his dorm and is friends with the guys on his soccer team. He also has several friends who are girls, but has yet to get a “girlfriend.” “Not right now,” he says, “Oscar tells me I need to make a move. And I am with one, someone on the floor, but I’m not in a hurry. Not just yet.” Although Manuel has had sexual experiences with girls in high school, he currently remains focused on
his studies. His high school girlfriend broke up with him during his senior year, and he has never really understood why she left. He did not go to his senior prom, which was a disappointment, but not a crushing defeat since he could have gone with someone but simply chose not to. Through the fall and winter semesters, he has not had sex with anyone else since the girl he broke up with in high school, but that seems about ready to change.

He is also clear that he is straight, and not gay. Every now and then he will point out on Facebook or to his friends that he has had his hair cut, or changed a picture so he does not “look like a homo.” Even though he worries about his size and weight, Manuel is relatively comfortable with his body and does not seem overly obsessed by his appearance or how others perceive him. He summarizes one day, “I have to just do what I can. I’m not tall or that good looking or rich. But I’m okay. And I’m good at soccer!”

As the year moves on, Manuel also strikes up relationships with more friends and begins to be more active with various women. “They say I’m cute, whatever that means,” he shrugs one day. “Some of them say I’m too quiet, but they don’t know me. When people get to know me they see I’m funny.”

“Gonna be a good night tonight,” he writes on Facebook. “Drinking and dancing the night away with some honeys! ;”) When I ask him several days later what that meant and the outcome he laughs: “Oscar wrote that. One of the girls, she said Oscar and I spend so much time together we must be gay, and I went to take a shower and he got on my Facebook and wrote that.”

**Creating Self-Regulatory Behaviors**

Manuel has me read a paper about a visit to a club for his musicology course that he took in summer school immediately after his high school graduation. He writes:

It was a Tuesday night and The Foundry on Melrose was our destination. We were heading to a blues concert. I have never been to a blues concert before, so I was expecting it to be fascinating. I have been on Melrose Street a couple of times, but I never thought that one day I will have such a great time in that street.

He describes the concert and concludes:

In the end, my visit to the Foundry on Melrose was one of the most fascinating experiences of my life. The money and the time that I spent on the concert were compensated by the talent and emotions that “50 Cent Hair Cut” brought to the table. I am not an expert in blues music but as far I am now their music was blue.

I look forward to talking with Manuel about his experiences; and when we next meet, I ask him how he liked the concert: “It was very boring. The
owner didn’t like us since we were kids, and we didn’t drink. And it was expensive. I had a lemonade and it cost like three dollars. It was boring.” I am surprised given what he has written in his paper; he shrugs and laughs:

I knew the teacher, the professor, would like what I said. He thought the club was something important, we were going to like. So I wrote it that way. Oscar says I am a big liar because I will say things to just get what I want.

Manuel is certainly trustworthy; he would not obviously cheat, for example, on a midterm exam. He also believes that, to reach what he wants to achieve, he needs to tell adults what they want to hear. Throughout his first year, we talk a great deal about the essays he writes for his classes, if he is saying what he thinks the professors want to hear, or if he is speaking his own beliefs. One paper he writes defends gay marriage, for example, and another critiques sexism in advertising. Yet I’ve also heard him make negative remarks about “homos” or speak disrespectfully about women in a particular way. The point is less that Manuel should or should not take a particular stance on a topic, but that he is an active agent in the way he communicates. He frequently adapts his messages to his audiences, not only in form and content, but also perspective.

Manuel is singular in his outlook to succeed, but this singularity also brings with it a certain loneliness, even isolation. We are driving one day after he has visited my house, and we are talking about friendship. “I don’t have very close friends,” he says. “It has not always worked out. When people are close, they can leave, or break. I prefer not having that.”

Manuel is close to his mother and his little sister. He is a busy individual and has several interactions with his friends and some adults as well. But in general he has learned that growing up in America is less a communal exercise than an individual one. Manuel’s sense of his Hispanic self, whether it be music, food, language, soccer, or a multitude of other instrumental actions, gets incorporated into who he is and who he is becoming as he navigates his first year in college. Some may see his life as buttressed by a variety of support structures, but what I have outlined here actually is someone who regulates his own life, which results in a certain insularity, even loneliness. He carries his goals with him and has few to share in his accomplishments and struggles en route to adulthood.

THE FLUID NATURE OF IDENTITY

My purpose here has been to consider how a person’s identity changes during the first year of college. In doing so, I have worked from a cultural perspective informed by the concept of social capital. I also, however, have taken issue with previous assumptions about the static nature of social capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, 1983/1986; Musoba & Baez, 2009). Scholars
have written a great deal about the challenges that the lack of capital creates for low-income, first-generation youth (Menjivar, 2000; Tierney & Hallett, 2010, in press).

The idea of capital acquisition is complex and contested. Some individuals have employed easy understandings of highly theoretical terms, and others have made no attempt to ground these theoretical terms in the everyday practices of individuals like Manuel. Everyone, of course, understands the problems that a lack of economic capital presents. If Manuel had not received financial aid, there is no way he could have gone to college. The grants and loans that he received from the federal and state governments, in addition to scholarships from his university and the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, enabled him to attend university.

His identity, however, gets shaped not merely by his economic status, but also by a host of social factors that privilege some individuals and shortchange others. Too often presentations of identity get portrayed as static entities—a person is rich or poor, male or female, gay or straight. My intent in this life history, however, has been to suggest just how fluid one’s identity can be. That fluidity is both impacted by social capital and impacts the acquisition of social capital. One of the problems with discussions about social capital is that often the work is entirely theoretical (e.g., Bourdieu) or the work has used such easy definitions that “social capital” becomes little more than a synonym for “network.” Some also have moved immediately to operationalizing the term and testing how social capital functions with groups of individuals.

I have employed a life history, however, to gain the “thickest” possible description in order to highlight how social capital functions with regard to identity development. The point, of course, is not simply that, with a sample of one individual, we are now able to operationalize and generalize the term. However, what a life history affords us is the ability to come to grips with various issues surrounding identity that we then might be able to broaden and explore with a larger sample (Tierney, 2010a). Although Bourdieu, like Marx, allows that some individuals may succeed, what such an observation neglects is whether there are other larger consequences that might apply. That is, one interpretation of Manuel’s life is that his success might be attributed to individual initiative and resilience. Another interpretation might be that he was simply lucky; indeed, my own interactions with him are probably factors in his success. Yet another possibility is that, in order for him to succeed, he has simply bought into liberal notions of hard work and lifting yourself up by your bootstraps.

I reject such interpretations, however, because they are in large part singular and causal. Of course, my involvement with him made a difference. Of course, he worked hard. To attribute an individual’s success to one or another factor and nothing more, however, denies human agency. Manuel
worked hard, not because I made him work hard or because he bought into a Hollywood definition of the American Dream. Indeed, he is proud to be from El Salvador; and although he remains troubled about his relationship (or lack of one) with his father, he enjoys being with his family and looks to them, particularly to his mother, as a source of support and inspiration.

Thus, just as we cannot obliterate an individual’s ability to create change in his or her life, we also cannot overlook the significant interactions that exist as a young person’s identity changes and morphs as he or she grows into adulthood surrounded by a web of relationships that Bourdieu would define as one’s *habitus* in the multiple fields of social organizations. From the perspective being advanced here, social capital does not so much pertain to the acquisition of skills as it does to the networks that enable the accumulation of dispositions enabled (or disabled) by interactions with social organizations such as schools, churches, museums and theaters. Recall, for example, Manuel’s comment that he went to a museum for the first time during his second term of senior year in high school. Such a point stands in contrast to students who regularly visit museums or attend the theater, and the like.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social capital assumes that educational credentials come by way of attaining non-neutral forms of knowledge embedded in the networks available to the individual. From this perspective, Manuel’s attendance at a university is trying to disrupt the cultural logic of capital that all too frequently places students like him in low-paying jobs or in a community college. This disruption, however, causes a challenge to the individual’s identity. The lack of social capital (and as a consequence, cultural capital) makes walking into a culturally rich environment like a research university fraught with anxiety and difficulty. Skiing trips at Christmas are impossible; the clothes one wore in high school are unfashionable; the knowledge of how to use a credit card or deal with a bank is entirely new.

A university is rich in network development; students meet faculty and also create associations with other students that are unlikely to happen if a student attends a community college or a working-class institution. Summer internships and job possibilities are available for those who attend institutions like Manuel’s university that are foreclosed to students who do not. But even at an elite institution like the one Manuel attends, students need to know where to look and who to ask and what to say to access those internships and jobs.

One’s family and community are the primary contexts for the accumulation of social capital. In this light, social capital enables or disables individuals and groups in accomplishing particular goals. Consider Manuel’s familial and social background. He is the first in his family not only to attend college but also to graduate from high school. Very few of his peers at Fairchild have gone to an elite institution. Further, his arrival from El Salvador to the United States virtually cut off any networks that he had in his home country,
and his arrival here was not met with any immediate connections. As Cecilia Menjivar (2000) has noted, “For most Salvadoran immigrants the context of reception in the United States has been far from hospitable” (p. 77).

His inability to speak English further circumscribed those networks with whom he could interact. In contrast to a teenager born in the United States to a wealthy family who could afford to send him to a private high school, Manuel’s challenges have been not so much the maintenance of social networks, but the creation of them. A lack of social capital makes it harder for people to develop economic and cultural capital. At the same time, he has looked to his extended family—mother, siblings, grandparents, and uncle—as touchstones for him as he moves into adulthood.

One of my concerns with deterministic analyses of social capital (Musoba & Baez, 2009) is that the individual’s identity gets portrayed in a monochromatic and static fashion. I have tried to show here, however, how dynamic Manuel’s life actually is. Deterministic portraits of the poor often make them pawns of capitalism, unable to claw their way out of poverty. Whether purposefully or not, such analyses often portray the backgrounds from which these individuals come as weak or inferior to those who have social capital and, as a consequence, economic capital. I entirely understand Portes and Rumbaut’s (2006) point, for example, about the important role that social context plays in the economic prospects of immigrant families (p. 248). However, such analyses explicitly or implicitly frequently assume a culture of poverty; and when one comes from such circumstances, the ability to rise above, or beyond, these circumstances occurs only through superhuman efforts.

Manuel’s life history stands in contra-distinction from such an analysis. I appreciate that, as Holdaway and Alba (2009) have observed, for Latino families “educational pathways in the United States appear to be strewn with [multiple] stumbling blocks” (p. 601). Manuel is the exception in that he has jumped over those stumbling blocks, but I caution against painting his exceptionality in heroic terms. Casting an achiever as heroic denies agency to individuals and leads to the assumption that systemic change is impossible short of full-scale revolution.

I do not question Manuel’s determination and wherewithal. Recall his willingness to go to classes, sit in the front of the classroom, and ask questions even though others may not and most others speak better English than he does. Further, I noted how he sent me, as well as several other individuals, numerous drafts of his essays because he knew his work needed to be improved; such hard work can be rare in any individual, but especially a teenager living in an environment that is not especially focused on academic outcomes.

However, Manuel still struggles in classes, he still needs to do a great deal of work to succeed, and his grades are a mixture of A’s and B’s. He would be the first to admit that his knowledge is not particularly extraordinary. He
recognizes that if Oscar worked harder he would get better grades. He also
would acknowledge that he is “normal”—by which he would mean that he
prefers playing soccer to reading, enjoys hip-hop and rap more than any
other type of music, and prefers using his computer is to play games and
watch videos rather than find scholarly resources.

He also is unaware of what exists “out in the world.” Summer work to him
is not an internship at a prestigious law firm, for example, that may build
his resume and enhance his networks; rather, summer work is a way to earn
money to help his mom and pay for school. At his young age, Manuel is not
theoretically versed in the nuances of Pierre Bourdieu or James Coleman. He
is, however, deeply reflective about his own life, his circumstances, and his
trajectory. Because he has been disappointed in previous relationships and
has had a difficult time since he left his father, he is hesitant to form deep
attachments to others, afraid that he will be hurt yet again. And yet, I pointed
out above how he has learned to communicate in multiple registers to mul‑
tiple people in order to succeed and, in this manner, create social networks.

He also has no hesitancy in expressing who he is and what he likes. He
does not hide that he frequently goes home on the weekend or that he is
Latino. To be sure, he also has morphed from a high school to a college stu‑
dent, but such changes underscore my point here. His identity is both in flux
and stable. His lack of networks has forced him to utilize his own personal
resources rather than those that would await him if he were wealthy or from
an upper-class neighborhood. His own sense of cultural integrity, rather than
disabling him, has enabled him to navigate the foreign waters of a mainstream
university. He goes home for birthdays and family celebrations, not merely
out of familial obligation, but because he enjoys these events. Spending time
with his younger sister is not only a responsibility but something he enjoys
doing. In these respects, his family ties, relationship to individuals such as
me, and his ability to navigate unfamiliar terrain confirm previous research
by scholars such as Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller (2005).

I pointed out above how Manuel has yet to figure out how to manage his
time in a way that aligns with long-term goals and objectives, but he also
has become aware of material deadlines that he had no knowledge of only
six months ago. Rather than a portrait of someone who cannot change,
this life history demonstrates how fluid Manuel’s life is and how that life is
embedded in social capital. True, some parts of his life are a mainstay. He
still has a passion for soccer and he has maintained the youthful exuberance
that I observed when I first met him, but he also is changing in important
ways. His ideas are changing and so are his ways of managing his identity.
Like any teenager, he still is trying to negotiate sexual relations and what
it means to be a man; but in some respects, even that aspect of his identity
is fluid and undetermined in ways that would be different if he had not
gone to college or had remained in El Salvador. It is not so much that he is
morphing into an American but rather that he is in an environment where definitions themselves—disability, gay, straight, ethnicity, and the like—are unanchored and able of redefinition.

However many challenges he faces, the portrait I have given here also highlights, not how he is broken down by these obstacles, but rather how he acknowledges them and figures out how to overcome them. He still thinks in instrumentalities—a “good” student goes to classes, does homework, works hard, etc.—rather than someone who is intellectually curious. But what he has shown in my time with him is his ability to adapt and, at the same time, maintain his personal self-worth as he learns to build social networks and, as a consequence, social capital.

“I want to get a college degree so I can help my community. My Hispanic heritage has made me a more determined person,” Manuel writes in one essay for a scholarship. I ask him later on: “Is that the truth? What do you really think?” He puts his hands on his chin, pauses, and finally says:

I work hard. I want to do a good job. I know I like who I am, that I am from El Salvador, my grandmother, my family. I know I can succeed. But I know I need help, too. And when I do succeed, I think I want to be able to help out. I can do that.

References


