The pursuit of social capital among adolescent high school aged girls: The role of formal mentor-mentee relationships

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ABSTRACT

Social capital has been found to contribute to the upward social mobility of youth. This study investigates the process of social capital development among a group of ethno-racial minority adolescent girls involved with a community based nonprofit organization that acts as a catalyst for developing mentor-mentee relationships. One to one interviews were conducted with 15 program participants. Findings show that although this group is young, they have an awareness of their lack of social capital and use their mentorship relationship to build social capital. Mentees then use this newly acquired social capital to help pursue educational attainment through acceptance to university programs and connections to practicing professionals. The findings demonstrate the importance of creating programming that promotes access to social capital for high school aged youth. Insights have implications for thinking innovatively to adapt current efforts or create new opportunities to better support the upward social mobility and transitions for this age cohort.

1. Introduction

The pursuit of upward social mobility generally refers to those actions that support improved socioeconomic status, such as through educational attainment or employment. Recent research on upward social mobility has focused on how social capital can contribute to this trajectory (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014; Li, Savage, & Warde, 2008). For example, having social capital has been found to be deeply tied to the successful transition from school to work or higher education for young people (Graham, Shier, & Eisenstat, 2015; Krahn & Taylor, 2005).

The theory of social capital suggests that the social relationships or networks that individuals have can impact their own personal development (Coleman, 1990). Loury (1977) introduced the term as a means of describing the range of social resources a person has, with the intention of highlighting how these social resources shape perspectives on young person aspirations and cognitive development. Bourdieu's (2001) essay 'The Forms of Capital' (originally published in 1983) elaborates further. He suggests that the "volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections [they] can effectively mobilise and on the volume of capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed by each of those to whom [they are] connected" (p.103). Therefore, social capital refers to social assets that are not solely monetary in nature but can also promote social mobility

(Bourdieu, 2001). Social capital is the culmination of real or potential resources that are related to a network of relationships (Bourdieu, 2001). Sources of social capital include social networks, communities, civic engagement, as well as community identity and belonging (Fabiansson, 2015).

One reason for this connection between social capital and upward social mobility is because social capital can create, promote, and perpetuate upwardly mobile aspirations in youth (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Chesters & Smith, 2015; Graham et al., 2015). While the understanding of upward social mobility (i.e. going on to post-secondary schools or earning a sufficient wage) may be different among individual youth (Chesters & Smith, 2015; Krahn & Taylor, 2005), the benefits of social capital for supporting these upwardly mobile aspirations has been widely supported in empirical literature (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Graham et al., 2015; Kim & Schneider, 2005; Krahn & Taylor, 2005; Lareau, 2011; Lin, 1999, 2000; Oliver & Cheff, 2014; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yeung & Rausher, 2014).

The construction of social capital for youth can happen in numerous ways. For example, social capital can be built by participating in community programs that have a focus on health promotion through the creation of peer level educational groups (Patel et al., 2016). On an individual level, social capital can be mobilized for the purposes of upward social mobility through strong family ties or friendships (Delgado, Ettekal, Simpkins, & Schaefer, 2016; Lai, Wong, & Feng,

2015; Motti-Stefanidi, 2015). In children, social capital building can occur through educational programming (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011; Meijers, Kuijpers, & Gundy, 2013) or programs for youth outside of school (Chesters & Smith, 2015; Viau, Denault, & Poulin, 2015). Finally, social capital can be built through mentorship programs (Seelig, 2011; Thomas, 2015; Zippay, 1995).

While previous research has identified the important role that social capital can play in the upward social mobility of youth, this research tends to position the subjects (i.e. youth) as passive receivers of the benefits of social capital, suggesting that children and youth generate social capital through chance; whether it be by being born into a family with strong ties to their community, or through making friends in school (Kuijpers et al., 2011; Meijers et al., 2013). There is little mention of how adolescents perceive their social capital and contextualize it in their pursuit of upward social mobility. There is research showing that most young people have high achieving aspirations (or aim to be upwardly mobile) and are inclined to pursue strong labour market attachments (Reeskens & van Oorschot, 2008; Taylor, 2011), but little that describes their active role in developing and pursuing these opportunities, many of which are created in part by available social capital.

Furthermore, within the literature about youth and their construction of social capital, one focus has been on the process of groups of young people creating their own social networks among peers to generate social capital and mobilize it for success (Holland, 2009). Most scholarship on social capital involving children is based on school achievement; showing a positive correlation between social capital and school achievement (Delgado et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2015; Motti-Stefanidi, 2015; Viau et al., 2015). Likewise, Chesters and Smith (2015) have found that social capital generated by youth in out-of-school activities is associated with greater aspirations for education. Furthermore, the current literature that discusses social capital and its relation to occupational attainment tends to focus on youth over 18, or young adults of various ages (Graham et al., 2015; Graham, Shier, & Eisenstat, 2014). What is currently missing in the literature is how social capital contributes to the occupational attainment goals of adolescent youth, and how they strategize to achieve it.

In an effort for the further development of this line of inquiry, this research presents the findings from a qualitative evaluation of a mentorship program for youth. Within that study, program participants were interviewed, and asked to describe the benefits and reasons for their participation. Through inductive analysis a common theme emerged relating to the benefits and role of the program in supporting their social capital development and is the focus of this article.

2. Methods

Following an exploratory qualitative research design (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2009; Patton, 1990), high school aged youth participating in a mentor-mentee program were recruited to participate in one to one interviews with a trained research assistant to better understand the role and benefits of the mentorship program in supporting youth program participant needs. This study received ethics certification from (Name of Ethics Review Board Removed for Anonymous Peer Review).

The mentorship program is part of a non-profit organization, located in a lower socio-economic status neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada – where program participants had attended high school. This organization connected professional, female mentors to its adolescent mentees, and provided employment-skills related workshops (n = 5) to its participants over a period of 9 months (from September to June). Mentors are initially screened by the program staff, and then matched with mentees based on their interest. The program supports mentorship through technology (i.e. through social media or electronic mail) along with face to face interactions. Generally, program participants connected with mentors throughout the program year at least once a

month, however most described sending frequent emails to their mentors over the course of a month, and meeting face to face at least once a month. Program participants apply and are assessed if they meet program requirements. The organization aims to support adolescent girls who experience any of the following social and economic barriers: gender inequality; financial insecurity; lack of support from parents or guardians; are a newcomer to Canada; have mental health challenges; or experience limited access to other specialized programs that support educational attainment. The program offers opportunities for mentorship, internships, and scholarships.

All participants currently enrolled (N = 30) were contacted by the research team by email and provided information about the study along with the informed consent document. Research ethics deemed that parental consent or assent was not required, due to the age of the respondents, and their cognitive capacity to provide informed consent. Respondents replied by email about their willingness to be contacted by telephone by a trained research assistant to discuss the study further and go over the informed consent document prior to agreeing to participate in an interview. Of those respondents, 15 agreed to participate. They all identified as female, were in grade 11 or grade 12, were either 16 or 17 years old, and could be identified as an ethno-racial or ethno-cultural minority. The age and gender status are requirements for program participation. The ethno-racial or ethno-cultural background is not required. However, the program supports adolescent girls who experience barriers to accessing post-secondary education and employment. Discrimination and racism within contemporary society are significant barriers to employment and education among ethno-racial minority youth in Canada and elsewhere (Hopkins, Taylor, & Zubrick, 2013; Yan, Lauer, & Chan, 2012). Furthermore, it should be noted that all respondents spoke English fluently. However, we did not collect information about whether English was a first or second language. Likewise, some respondents indicated in their interviews that their families were newcomers to Canada. However, we did not distinguish between respondents in our analysis based on their immigration status in Canada.

Each respondent participated in the workshops and other social events and activities (such as museum visits) planned by the organization. They were also actively engaged in their one on one meetings with their mentors. However, the manner of interaction varied. Since this program supported online engagement, some respondents indicated being in contact with their mentors through email more frequently than others. Other respondents indicated they preferred the face to face opportunities more, and as a result engaged with their mentors in that manner more. However, the level and type of interaction was generally mixed among all program participants. There was no indication that the 15 participants were not representative of the full population of 30 program participants. Participants were gifted a $10 CAD gift card to a clothing store, but no other compensation was given.

Data were collected utilizing a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews occurred towards the end of program completion in April and May of the program year. The results from this study were a part of a qualitative evaluation study. Examples of questions included: 1) What were the reasons for why you chose to participate in the mentorship program? 2) What types of benefits do you think you received due to your participation in the program? And 3) What aspects of your mentorship relationship did you find the most useful? Researchers did not ask specific questions about social capital. However, through these questions, and the open-ended structure of the interview, a focus on social capital access and mobilization emerged within the data that describes the benefits and purpose of the mentorship program among study respondents. Interviews were conducted over the telephone and in person and lasted approximately 30 min in length.

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed utilizing qualitative methods of analytic induction and constant comparison strategies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The interview transcripts were read firstly by each