Cross-community youth work in North Belfast: Funding and youth leader personal networks ☆

Stephanie S. Smith

Queen's University Belfast, School of Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work, Belfast BT7 1NN, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

In North Belfast, young people overwhelmingly live, socialize and attend schools along sectarian lines, much the result of the regions' recent social, political and armed conflict. Cross-community youth work, a recurring activity in community development circles, is aimed at overcoming such social disadvantages among young people from the two predominant communities (Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist). This article critically explores the relationship between a North Belfast adult cross-community youth leaders' professional personal network size and the amount of funding they apply for, receive and share with their peers. Findings reveal a significant relationship between personal network size and the amount of funding cross-community youth leaders (1) applied for and the amount they (2) received. However, no association was found between a respondent's personal network size and the amount of funding (3) shared with other cross-community youth initiatives. Implications for both the current state and the future of cross-community youth work are discussed.

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1. Introduction

North Belfast is the section of Northern Ireland's capital city known to be the least socially cohesive, where much of the population lives divided along sectarian lines (Community Relations Council (CRC), 2012). The geography underwent dramatic demographic shifts and the disintegration of communal relations escalated during decades of political, social and armed conflict (see: Darby & Morris, 1974; Doherty & Poole, 1997; Griffiths, 1971; North Belfast Community Action Project (NBCAP), 2002) in a time referred to by many as 'the Troubles' throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. During this time, the area experienced more conflict related deaths and injuries than anywhere else in Northern Ireland (Community Relations Council (CRC), 2012). At present, most young people from the two longstanding and predominant communities (Catholic/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist) not only reside, but socialize and attend school in segregation. Yet beyond North Belfast's scarred history and persistent divisions are a multitude of additional challenges that place limitations on the personal growth and advancement of many young people. North Belfast and many of its residents continue to suffer from substantial levels of poverty, pervasive health problems, high unemployment and low educational attainment (Community Relations Council (CRC), 2012).

In efforts to offset social disadvantages experienced by young people, building and strengthening relations have been a focused response from adult youth leaders across the area. A general aim of 'cross-community' youth work is to support the development of inter-communal relations. Simultaneously, cross-community youth programs extend opportunities that promote the capacity-building of young people. Such programs take on a variety of media (e.g. conflict mediation training, cultural identity workshops, drop-in sessions) many of which can be considered examples of informal education. Cross-community youth work is not a new feature in Northern Ireland; rather, this particular type of youth work took place throughout the conflict (see: Connelly & Maggin, 1999; Hammond, 2007; McKeown & Cairns, 2012). Due to the absence of documentation however, no secure claims can be made about the extent to which cross-community youth work has taken place historically. Early references to such programs nevertheless serve as evidence that expanding the social worlds and extending the life chances of young people across divisions have been on the agenda for some time.

Cross-community youth work implies a level of collaboration between adult youth leaders from 'both communities' to coordinate, facilitate and support the development of relations and personal development of young people. Where there has been scant attention given to adult youth leader relations, it is worth considering that these change agents must first initiate or draw upon existing professional connections to bring about cross-community initiatives and ultimately, to meet overall program objectives. In other words, should youth leaders not maintain relations with their peers across divisions, the opportunity

for young people to participate in cross-community programs would likely not exist. As an expression of policy, funding bodies have endorsed the value of youth leader collaboration by strongly encouraging, if not requiring, collaborative inter-community projects. And while the role and impact of funding, a critical element of all social programs, on forging cross-community societal relations has been explored in recent research (e.g. Byrne, Arnold, Fissuh, Standish, Irvin, & Tennent, 2009; Byrne, Arnold, Standish, Skarlato, & Tennent, 2010; Byrne, Fissuh, Thiessen, Irvin, & Tennent, 2010; Karari, Byrne, Skarlato, Ahmed, & Hyde, 2013), the link between cross-community youth leader relations and funding has been under-researched to date.

This article therefore takes an extended look at cross-community youth leaders' personal networks in North Belfast. The view is taken that youth leaders' relations are critical to bringing about social change. Across the area, youth leaders operate within hyper-localized settings, at a grassroots level. This particular population is recognized to be working within or on the cusp of the geographical fragments that makeup North Belfast, often with scarce resources and limited funding. The design and delivery of cross-community youth projects rely on the work of self-motivated individuals, each with varying professional social networks. This article will begin with a review of social capital literature as it relates to the study of social networks and will go on to explore the research question: what is the relationship between the size of a cross-community youth leaders' personal network and the amount of funding they apply for, receive and share with their peers? A description of study participants and methods employed will be followed by a presentation of findings. The paper will conclude with a discussion on the implications the findings pose for the current and future state of cross-community youth work.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Social capital

The concept of social capital has an extended history (Baker, 1990; Bourdieu, 1980; Hanifan, 1920; Jacobs, 1961; Loury, 1977, chap. 8) and given the varying conceptualizations, the theoretical background constitutes a contested space. The multitude of definitions (see: Adler & Kwon, 2000: 20), for example, and on-going controversies (e.g. Lin, 1999: 33) relating to social capital serve to illustrate its disputed status. Yet at a basic level, collaboration can be viewed as a space in which social capital accrues; in other words, collaborative relations provide a conduit for social capital to flow and to be exchanged. The notion that social interactions yield benefits for all willing parties is a recognized tenet of social capital (Bourdieu, 1983/1986; Coleman, 1988) and can be thought of here as two youth leaders sharing information for mutually perceived benefit.

Despite its contested status, Lin (2008) notes that all scholars who have contributed to the greater discussion recognize the basic premise that social capital is inherently network-based and cites a wide variety of scholarly work to support his claim (Bourdieu, 1980, 1983/1986; Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1988, 1990; Erickson, 1995, 1996; Flap, 1991, 1994; Lin, 1982, 2008; Putnam, 1993, 1995, 2000). Thus social capital theory supports the idea that social networks have value under certain circumstances. Lin's (2001) perspective emphasizes the importance of using one's connections and social relations in order to reach goals. Ultimately social capital itself, or the resources accessed through, for example, a youth leader's relations and connections, are paramount in achieving any sort of objectives whether they be at an individual youth leader or community level (Lin, 2001).

2.2. Social capital and personal networks

Social capital, like well-invested monetary capital, can accumulate. The more social capital a youth leader has, the more they will likely acquire. This notion is confirmed in many ways and can be thought of on a macro level as the more social connections one has, the more likely one will accrue over time. Variations of the theory have been named and renamed over the past century (see: Barabasi, 2012; Barabasi & Albert, 1999; Merton, 1968, 1988; Pareto, 1906, 1971), yet the effect remains the same: in viewing social connectivity as wealth, the rich tend to get richer (see: Merton, 1968). The circumstances by which the connections form may vary yet the notion of accumulated advantage presents the idea that the connections on a large-scale are not made at random. Rather, they are formed based on the number of connections one has with others allowing more connected individuals to benefit from more links at the expense of their less-connected peers. This means new actors will have very few, if any, connections upon joining a network.

A personal network is composed of the connections one has with others and the ties between their connections (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2013: 262). This type of network focuses on the individual (thus 'personal'), which varies in composition from person to person. As leading network analysts, Borgatti et al. (2013) find that research on personal networks falls into either one of two camps: social capital and social homogeneity. In the former, the "research agenda is to investigate how achievement and success are a function of an individual's social ties, particularly how those ties enable access to resources and support"; alternatively, the latter is focused to how ties shape one's attitude and behavior (Borgatti et al., 2013: 270). In drawing from the network paradigm, this research is focused to the size of youth leaders' personal networks and exploring their access to resources, namely funding.

Although personal networks vary among human beings, the importance of cross-community youth leader personal networks is essential to the functioning of youth programs. Therefore, this article begins with the assumption that cross-community youth leaders leverage their personal connections to coordinate and deliver inter-communal youth initiatives. A second assumption is that cross-community youth leaders also leverage their connections when applying for funding for cross-community youth projects. Collaboration is viewed within this context as a space in which the sharing of social capital takes place and as intricately linked to the funding acquisition process. Within this study, the funding acquisition process is conceptualized as composing of three stages. The first stage is *applying* for funding, the second *receiving* funding and the third stage is *sharing* funding. These three major components are proposed here given the inherent collaborative nature of cross-community youth work and strongly encouraged or otherwise required stipulations put forth by funding bodies (e.g. collaborative applications and the joint delivery of programs).

3. Methods

3.1. Research design

The design this study follows is a mixed-method, within-group, post-hoc model. An adaptation of the sequential exploratory design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003) where both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed formed three distinct phases in this study. As the focus of this article involves exploring a network structure, network findings are explored in detail here. Qualitative methods, though not reviewed in any depth here, were initially used to inform the overall research design and to later develop interpretive themes and extend network findings.

3.2. Sample

Of the youth leaders who participated in the network survey (n = 48), 41.6% were female and 58.3% were male. The ages of participants ranged where 45.8% reported being between the ages of 20 to 39 years of age, 31.2% between the ages of 40 to 49, and 22.9% were 50 years of age or older. 35.4% or respondents reported being Catholic, 52.1% Protestant and 12.5% other or none.