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At-risk youths' self-sufficiency: The role of social capital and help-seeking orientation

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ABSTRACT

Youths' help-seeking orientation on the individual level, and the presence of bonding and bridging social capital at the contextual level, are important factors in explaining at-risk urban youths' self-sufficiency. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 22 at-risk youths aged 15–25 years in an urban area, to study youths' perceptions of help-seeking and social capital. Consequently, we attempted to uncover the associations between these concepts. The results indicate that only few youths had positive help-seeking orientations, irrespective of their preference for self-reliance. Sources of help that youths feel comfortable to activate in their immediate environment are limited, but support is also found in extended family members. Bridging social capital is mainly provided by professionals and comprises instrumental and informational support. Many youths believe they can be understood only by individuals who are similar to them, but simultaneously indicate a need for additional support from significant others.

1. Introduction

For many individuals, adolescence is a period characterized by changes such as cognitive and social developments. When there is a good fit between the needs of adolescents and support in their social environments, these developments will usually result in opportunities for growth and more independence (Arnett, 2004; Eccles et al., 1993). At the same time, young people are expected to take more responsibility for their own lives. There is a growing emphasis on self-sufficiency, which has been referred to as “Big Society” in the United Kingdom and “Participation Society” in the Netherlands (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2014). Self-sufficiency requires both the capability of insight into one's situation and the availability of sources of help when one is not capable of handling challenges (Lauriks et al., 2014).

As the previous definition shows, self-sufficiency depends on two conditions. First, self-sufficiency requires insight in one's situation and needs. Previous research on this dimension of self-sufficiency focuses on perceived barriers and facilitators in help-seeking, known as help-seeking orientation (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000; Tolsdorf, 1976). Help-seeking orientation is the perception of help which is shaped by one's belief of influence, need, and expectations of the usefulness of a network (Tolsdorf, 1976; Vaux, Burda, & Stewart, 1986). The second dimension of self-sufficiency relates to the availability of sources of help, also known as the social capital of an individual. Social capital is the product of social support based on generalized or interpersonal trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation in social networks (Putnam, 2000). Given the societal emphasis on self-sufficiency, when judging its feasibility both factors need consideration. For example, if youths have insight into their situation and needs, but lack the appropriate sources for help, they will more likely struggle to become self-sufficient. Conversely, when youths have access to supportive resources but do not think they need support, the question rises if they are self-sufficient enough. The expectation of youths who are transitioning to adulthood to become self-sufficient ignores the fact that youths might

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perceive their situation in a different way than adults or professionals do. It also ignores the fact that resources to support self-sufficiency might be limited for some youths.

Studying factors that influence youths' opportunity for self-sufficiency at multiple levels (i.e. perceptions on the individual level and social capital at the contextual level) contributes to the expanding body of knowledge of positive youth development (Jenson & Fraser, 2015). Conditions that young people need if they are to develop optimally include factors that make youths more resilient, more resistant to stressful conditions, and more likely to grow into healthy adults. Positive perceptions of one's situation (e.g. optimism, control, responsibility) are individual protective factors when they empower youth to solve problems (McCrae & Costa, 2003; Rotter, 1966; Rutter, 1987). However, these protective factors interact with risk factors in the environments of youths. Growing up in an urban area is an important contextual factor in studying the perceptions of youth. Social support and social embeddedness have been identified as relevant protective factors on the contextual level (Groenendaal & van Yperen, 1994; Jenson & Fraser, 2015; Ungar, 2015). However, many youths in urban areas live in low-income families and disadvantaged neighborhoods. Consequently, they may experience closed-opportunity structures which can hinder social support and social embeddedness (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). In interaction with personal risk factors, these youths are at risk of negative outcomes, such as academic failure, substance use, or unemployment (Jenson & Fraser, 2015). Therefore, protective factors at the individual level become relevant in the context of the urban environment. As such, how at-risk youths perceive their situation and whether they need help is shaped by both individual beliefs and the availability of social support at the contextual level. The aim of this study is to elucidate how at-risk urban youths cope with the societal emphasis on self-sufficiency by exploring their own perceptions of their situation and social capital. These elements have separately been found to be related to self-sufficiency, but they have not been examined in relation to each other (Barwick, de Man, & McKelvie, 2009). Since we assume that it is not actual support which shapes youths' opportunities for self-sufficiency, but rather their perceptions and willingness to use support resources (Goodwin-Smith et al., 2017; Vaux et al., 1986), we conducted qualitative research to gain insight into this.

1.1. Beliefs and preferences concerning self-sufficiency

Previous research has focused on youths' help-seeking orientation as one of the indicators of self-sufficiency. Help-seeking is seeking help in terms of understanding, advice, information, treatment, and general support (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005) from informal sources (e.g. friends, family, and mentors) or formal sources (e.g. teachers, youth workers, mental health services). Beliefs of helpfulness, problem recognition, and the availability of sources of help are related to a positive help-seeking orientation (Rickwood et al., 2005). A review of both quantitative and qualitative research into barriers to, and facilitators of help-seeking resulted in a classification of reasons for seeking or not seeking help (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010). Motivators for seeking help included having had positive past experiences of the care that was provided, positive relationships with service staff, and social support. The barriers identified in this review included preferring other sources of help, not wanting to burden someone else, and reliance on oneself (Gulliver et al., 2010).

Research on the help-seeking behavior of youths has mainly focused on help-seeking with regard to resolving emotional or behavioral problems. Staying in school and finding employment are examples of equally important issues for at-risk youths. Research on college students asking for academic and career help, for example, also showed self-reliance as a barrier, in addition to a perceived unavailability of adults who they needed support from (Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016). In addition, beliefs about one's control over their life has been consistently linked to help-seeking orientation, and plays a major role in becoming self-sufficient (DePaulo, Fisher, & Nadler, 1983; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). For example, self-reliance - the preference to solve problems on one's own- has been found to be a coping strategy that reduces the use of both formal and informal support (Ortega & Alegría, 2002; Scott, McMillen, & Snowden, 2015).

In summary, help-seeking is considered part of adolescents' and young adults' establishment of self-sufficiency. A positive help-seeking orientation is fundamental to resiliency (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). The role of self-reliance and the availability of others appear to be important factors in barriers to, and facilitators of, help-seeking among adolescents. To investigate the elements necessary for self-sufficiency of at-risk youths, it is important to start with the beliefs, preferences, and expectations of at-risk youths concerning help and support.

1.2. Social capital

The above-mentioned barriers show that not only past experiences and beliefs about one's control are of importance in help-seeking, but also the presence of, belief in, attitude towards and expectations concerning the usefulness of one's network (Tolsdorf, 1976; Vaux et al., 1986). Social networks are sources of social capital and have been studied as another indicator of self-sufficiency.

Social capital can be divided into two types: bonding and bridging. Bonding social capital refers to trusting and co-operative relations between members of a network who perceive themselves to be similar in terms of their shared social identity (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). For youths, this consists primarily of relationships with parents, siblings, other family members, and peers (Bassani, 2007; Bottrell, 2009; Raymond-Flesch, Auerswald, McGlone, Comfort, & Minnis, 2017). Networks consisting of individuals with a shared social identity are characterized by frequent contact, and therefore this type of network mainly provides emotional support (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2005). Bridging social capital refers to resourceful relations with people who do not share a common social or socio-demographic identity and who provide access to new and valuable information (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). For youths, bridging contacts could be teachers, counselors, healthcare providers, and other adults in their community (Resnick et al., 1997). The primary purpose of these relations is often instrumental, providing guidance, advice, and tangible assistance that is not present in the bonding social network.

Bridging social capital could be particularly important for at-risk youths because it provides them with richer resources and alternative perspectives on, among other things, education and health (Bassani, 2007; Bottrell, 2009; Ellison, Wohn, & Greenhow, 2014). However, previous research found that American adolescents from low income families and/or neighborhoods had less access to bridging supportive adults compared to adolescents from higher income families (Raposa, Erickson, Hagler, & Rhodes, 2018). If they did have access to a supportive nonparental adult, this adult often appeared to be a family member, instead of a bridging contact.

Ferguson's (2006) meta-analysis showed that family structure (single-parent versus two-parent households, the presence of a paternal figure), social relationships, supportive social networks, and links to local organizations and institutions are indicators of the social capital of young people. However, in accordance with Putnam's view of social capital, we want to pay attention to the fact that not all resources are considered capital. Scholars have stressed that only in positive and active relations, resources can be mobilized in order to serve as capital (Bassani, 2007; Portes, 1998). Additionally, claiming something to be social capital because it is valued by privileged groups in society does not address the needs of at-risk youths (Yosso, 2005). Positive relations will also be shaped by cultural capital, examples of which are language and appearance (Bourdieu, 1986). These indicators of cultural capital