Academic help seeking among Russian minority and non-minority adolescents: A social capital outlook

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Academic help-seeking and help-providing in school setting streamlines learning process and advances social competencies among students. Little research has examined differential patterns of help-seeking among students of ethnic minority and non-minority status. The present study conceptualizes school help-providing as remedial exchange of social capital among students. To explore possible barriers to such exchange, we compare help-seeking networks among mid-adolescents (15–16 y.o.) of migrant ethnic minority opposite those of non-minority origins, in Russian high schools (N = 3496). The data were collected in 183 classrooms from 49 schools of Greater Moscow area; network information was elicited from students' nominations of their classmates whom they ask for help in Math. Statistical analysis relied on multilevel dyadic p2 model. The data strongly suggest that school performance, academic self-evaluation, and gender are factors affecting help-seeking and help-providing behavior in classroom. By contrast, socio-economic status and, importantly, ethnic minority status had no influence on peer help relations in Moscow schools, suggesting that (1) minority status does not universally introduce stigmatizing barriers in youth social capital exchanges; and (2) majority-minority dynamics may vary as a function of the macro-context in which adolescents are embedded. Implications for further research and policy are discussed in turn.

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1. Introduction

Social capital, in our contemporary understanding, refers to the resources accessible to a person through relationship ties. Relationships with other people give an individual access to information, skills, financial capital, career opportunities etc. that other people possess (Coleman, 1988; Crosnoe, Cavanagh, & Elder, 2003; Portes, 2000). The access to the resources through social relationships is, naturally, proportionate to the number of social relationships, and to the resourceful utility of these relationships (Portes, 2000). Although some social scientists have considered social capital (further referred to as SC) as a mechanism maintaining social inequality, many studies have highlighted exchanges of SC across youth subpopulations as a remedy to social inequality, whereby adolescents from vulnerable groups gain access to advantageous knowledge, skills, norms and attitudes from their more endowed peers (Crosnoe et al., 2003; Dika & Singh, 2002; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995). Building and expedient use of interpersonal networks of academic help in school settings not only promotes immediate educational gains, but predicts future higher functioning by fostering

metacognitive and social skills and personal motivational resources (Cherng, Calarco, & Kao, 2012; Newman, 2002; Windzio, 2013).

There is a consensus among social scientists that immigrant and ethno-cultural minority populations tend to lack SC in the context of dominant cultures; thus the firm empirical support for the remedial, or beneficial, SC flow from majority to minority youth in the form of inter-peer academic help (Newman, 2002; Windzio, 2013). Additionally, there is a common assumption of stigma-related barriers to SC exchanges between majority and minority populations (Stanton-Salazar, Chávez, & Tai, 2001). This second assumption, however, has surprisingly little empirical support in the domain of academic help. We located only one report that empirically examined (and supported) majority-minority barriers in adolescent academic help, in the context of contemporary Germany (Zander, Webster, & Hannover, 2014). However, it is feasible to hypothesize that majority-minority dynamics vary across macro-level populations in which adolescents are embedded. The present study for the first time questions the universality of majority-minority barriers to SC exchanges in the form of academic help, and examines such barriers in the population of Russian high-school students in the Greater Moscow area.

One innovation of the present study is conceptualizing peer-to-peer academic help as SC exchange. SC framework explains the advantages of enlisting larger numbers of helpers: larger personal networks are

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known to buffer stress reactions and alleviate psychological distress, foster psychological well-being, and promote social/civic functioning (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Son & Lin, 2008). In contrast, pure academic help approach does not emphasize advantages of larger help networks, since the amount and regularity of received academic help does not depend on the number of enlisted helpers (Newman, 2002). Our interpretation of academic help as SC exchange leads to an innovative measurement approach. While most extant research measures academic help-seeking as a student's self-reported intention to seek help from peers, we evaluate size and structure of each respondent's personal network of academic assistance. Namely, students nominate those classmates whom they have asked for help in academic subjects. Such personal help networks represent each respondent's SC acquisition, a skill whose considerable advantages go far beyond academic progression (Newman, 2002). Since the present study focuses on networks of social relations, we employ innovative data-analytic methodology specifically developed for social network analysis: multi-level p2 model.

2. Social capital approach to academic help-seeking

2.1. Social capital and adolescent development

Recent literature has highlighted the remedial potential of inter-peer SC exchange to empower less endowed youth (Cherng et al., 2012; Newman, 2008; Stanton-Salazar et al., 2001). Thus Cherng et al. (2012) analyzing data from a large U.S. representative longitudinal data set, demonstrated that having a best middle-school friend with a college-educated parent significantly predicted college completion by the referent adolescent. Peer-based SC attainment has been linked in at-risk youth to the increased likelihood of educational success and reduced risk behavior (Crosnoe et al., 2003; Laplante, 2014; Perna & Titus, 2005; Winstanley et al., 2008). Of particular importance is the identification and reduction of barriers to SC exchange among youth (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Shim, Kiefer, & Wang, 2013; Walter, Lechner, & Kellermanns, 2007).

One problem with many studies of SC exchange has been the frequent content imprecision in operationalizing SC (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 2000). Instead of quantifying numbers of social relationships possessed by referent individuals, and estimating resource utility of these relationships, studies routinely use behavioral proxies of SC, e.g. engagement in productive youth activities thought to bolster positive social connections (Winstanley et al., 2008). This is hardly a proximal indicator of acquired SC since garnering new relationships from collective activities is likely to vary as a function of social skills and personality characteristics, such as extroversion (Selfhout et al., 2010). Also, new social relationships initiated through collective activities are not guaranteed to provide access to useful resources, and may, instead, facilitate risk behaviors. Other studies operationalize SC as youth's involvement with parents and teachers (Perna & Titus, 2005), also a distal indicator. To wit, research on youth SC exchanges needs improved measurement protocols that will clearly and directly quantify two essential attributes of SC: (a) the actual extent of the personal network of social relationships and (b) the resource-obtaining utility of these relationships. The present study addresses this gap by operationalizing students' SC attainment as their personal networks of academic help. In addition to our theoretical questions, we explore whether this novel approach to measuring academic help will capture meaningful patterns in the data.

2.2. Academic help and academic competence, self-efficacy and self-esteem

Academic help-seeking has been associated with seekers', and helpers', academic ability. In the case of helpers' competence, the association appears straightforward: help-seekers tend to select peer helpers with stronger academic competence (Nelson-Le Gall & Gumerman, 1984). The relationship between seekers' academic ability and their tendency to seek help is less clear and appear to vary among age groups. According to Nelson-Le Gall and Glor-Scheib (1986), elementary school students with lower academic competence tended to seek more help from peers and teachers; while mid-adolescents displayed no such association (Newman & Goldin, 1990). Such age difference may be related to adolescents' growing emphasis on self-image and emerging gender roles. Similarly, association between adolescent academic help-seeking and situational self-efficacy seems to vary across age groups: studies among older adolescents found low-efficacy students unlikely to ask for help (Kennedy, 1997), while in pre-adolescents low efficacy bolstered help-seeking (Butler, 1998; Gall & Jones, 1990). Yet other studies associated academic help-seeking with more global beliefs of self-concept and self-esteem nature. Thus Grayson, Miller, and Clarke (1998) reported that students with low self-esteem in academic subjects avoided seeking help because they feared further threat to their self-esteem by admitting failure on a task.

2.3. Gender differences in help-seeking

Adolescent academic help-seeking behavior appears to be affected by gender role stereotypes. Girls generally ask for help more often, and are less likely to avoid help-seeking when needed (Butler, 1998; Galdas, Cheater, & Marshall, 2005; Marchand & Skinner, 2007; Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998; Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005). Boys are less likely to seek help when they fear that their problems might be non-normative, or when they feel their sense of control, autonomy, or self-esteem threatened (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Ryan et al. (1998) argues that gender differences in academic help-seeking may be a function of achievement: it is more considerable among weaker students than among stronger ones. Some authors report no gender differences in students' help-seeking (Newman & Schwager, 1993).

2.4. Minority students and academic performance

In many societies, students from ethnic minorities and immigrant communities tend to experience disproportionate learning difficulties (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001; Kao & Thompson, 2003). Minority students' academic issues, however, vary broadly within and across national contexts as a function of acculturation, socio-economic status, perceived discrimination, educational systems and national integration - many factors operating on an individual and societal level (Alba & Holdaway, 2013; Crul & Mollenkopf, 2012; Holdaway, Crul, & Roberts, 2009; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Kao, Vaquera, & Goyette, 2013). There are also considerable differences in academic performance across ethnic minority groups: some of them show academic superiority relative to non-minority peers, while others tend to lag behind (op. cit., and Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Portes, 2000). SC approach offers a promising framework for population-based explanation of such differences (Perna & Titus, 2005; Portes, 2000; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

2.5. Minority status as a barrier to SC exchange

One important concept in network dynamics is homophily principle according to which youth tend to associate with peers of similar ethno-cultural nativity (Joyner & Kao, 2005; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Several recent studies suggested that ethnic homophily dynamics may weaken remedial peer-to-peer SC transfer to less endowed youth (Windzio, 2013). It is important to remember that the extent of homophily affecting minority populations may depend on the ethno-cultural diversity of social networks in which minority youth are embedded (Lubbers, Molina, & McCarty, 2007). Little research has explored how inter-ethnic network dynamics promote, and/or deter, exchange of