Bonding Capital and Bridging Capital: Predictors of Education in Young Adulthood

Jennifer Doty, M.S.
Jodi Dworkin, Ph.D.

Background

- Coleman (1988) introduced social capital as a means by which parents invest in their children, based on norms of trust and reciprocity.
- Social capital in families has been associated with low rates of behavioral problems and improved academic outcomes in cross-sectional studies (Parcel et al., 2010). Social capital benefits may be indirect by improving financial and educational situations or may directly relate to physical and mental health (Lin, 2001).
- However, the pathways by which social capital functions over time are not well understood. Putnam (2000) described two distinct forms of social capital. Bonding capital includes resources exchanged between those in emotionally close relationships (e.g., parents and children). Bridging capital refers to resources of information or diverse perspectives gained from weak ties in the community (Granovetter, 1982).

Current Study

Using data from the Youth Development Study (YDS), the current study aimed to examine bridging and bonding capital as mediators of the relationship between parent closeness in adolescence and education in early adulthood.

H 1: Parent closeness in adolescence will be associated with education in early adulthood.
H 2: Bonding capital (volunteering, religious attendance, and job referrals) will mediate the relationship between parent closeness in adolescence and education in early adulthood.
H 3: Bonding capital with friends in young adulthood will mediate the relationship between parent closeness and education.

Methods

Participants and Data Source

In 1987, YDS participants (N = 1,010) were recruited as ninth graders from the St. Paul public school district via random sampling (Mortimer, 2003). 58% were female and 84% were Caucasian. In 1991, when they were seniors in high school, 68% of the participants’ parents reported being married, 51% did not have school beyond high school, and 68% had an income less than $50,000. The current study utilizes Wave 4 (1991), 8 (1995), and 12 (2000) of the YDS data set.

Measures

- Parent closeness (wave 4): closeness for both mothers and fathers, measured by a 6 item scale (1 = not close to 4 = close; α = .86 – .87)
- Bridging capital (wave 8): volunteering (0 = never, 1 = temporarily, 2 = regularly), attendance at religious meetings (1= never to 5 = more than once a week), and job networking (0 = not employed to 3 = referred by multiple people)
- Bonding capital (wave 8): friendship closeness (1 = not close at all to 4 = extremely close) and friend support (1 = No, I don’t want to 4 = Yes, I am very sure I do)

Analysis Plan

Structural equation modeling using Mplus was used to evaluate bridging capital and bonding capital as mediators between parent closeness and education. FIML was used to address missing data.

Modeling Social Capital over Time

Results

Correlations were conducted among all variables. Closeness with father and mother in adolescence was associated with educational attainment in early adulthood (r = .161, p = .09). Indicators of bonding capital in young adulthood (volunteering, religious attendance, and job referrals) were respectively associated with educational attainment in early adulthood (r = .25, r = .14, r = .13). Bonding capital with friends in young adulthood was associated with educational attainment in early adulthood (r = .23, r = .18 respectively).

Structural Model: Testing Mediation

In order for mediation to be established, a direct relationship between parenting closeness and education in adolescence (age 18) and education in early adulthood (age 27) must be established (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The standardized direct effects path coefficient was .23 (p = .001). However, a large portion of the variance was explained by bridging and bonding capital in young adulthood (age 22). Specifically, the indirect effects of bonding capital were .16 (p = .006), and the indirect effects of bonding capital were .05 (p = .003). Figure 1 outlines the path coefficients of the specified relationships. Overall, the model explained 22% of the variance in education in early adulthood (R² = .22, p = .000). A model is considered to have a good fit if it has a nonsignificant chi-square value, a value of .05 or more on CFI, and RMSEA value less than .08. Goodness of fit statistics indicate that this model is a good fit compared to the data: χ²(16) = 24.38, p = .08, RMSEA = .024 (90% CI [.000, .041]), CFI = .98.

Discussion

Guided by social capital theory, the current study tested a model of the relationship between parent closeness in adolescence and educational attainment in early adulthood was mediated by bonding capital and bonding capital in young adulthood. Parent closeness predicted bridging capital, which in turn predicted educational attainment. Further more, parent closeness predicted bonding capital with friends during young adulthood, which in turn predicted educational attainment. The relationship between parent closeness and education was almost entirely accounted for by bridging capital and bonding capital, implying full mediation.

These findings support past research which has shown that parental relationships are foundational for social capital. Consistent with Coleman’s (1988) ideas, parent closeness may have promoted the ability to form close bonds with others in young adulthood. Strong attachment experiences early in life have been shown to predict peer relationships and relationship functioning which were related to adaptive functioning in early adulthood (Englund, Kuo, Puig, & Collins, 2011). Bridging capital appeared to be a more salient predictor of education than bonding capital.

Strengths & Limitations

- A strength of this study is that it lays the foundation to examine how bonding capital and bonding capital in young adulthood are related to other areas of adult life such as parenting efficacy.
- Further, the YDS data set has collected data on the children of the original cohort (Mortimer, 2002), allowing future examinations of the intergenerational transfer of social capital.
- This study is limited by the sample, which is primarily Caucasian and urban. Therefor, this work cannot be generalized.
- Although this study used common indicators of social capital, it is limited because it did not examine the mobilization of resources, which is a key theoretical construct of social capital theory.