

SOCIAL CAPITAL AS A PREDICTOR OF PROSOCIAL RISK BEHAVIOR AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract

Risk behavior is often associated with negative outcome only. However, risk behavior can also be related to positive outcomes. Many studies have been advocated in looking into the negative aspect of adolescent behavior and past research also have displayed positive role of social capital in decreasing these behaviors. However, little is known about the role of social capital in adolescents' prosocial risk behavior. This current study aimed to examine the role of social capital in predicting adolescents' prosocial risk behavior. In this study, 221 Malaysian secondary school students aged 14 and 16 years old from five secondary schools in Selangor state were recruited. These participating secondary schools were selected by using cluster sampling. The Youth Social Capital Scale and the Prosocial and Health Adolescent Risk Behavior Scale were used to measure the variables in this study. The results showed that social capital was a significant predictor of adolescents' prosocial behavior. Through this study, it could be seen that adolescents' ecological resources was important in developing adolescents who served as active agent of positive behaviors.

Keywords: Social capital, prosocial behavior, adolescents

Presenting Author's Biography



Glory Nancy Viapude is a developmental psychologist and graduated from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Currently, she works as a lecturer at the Department of Psychology and Counseling, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. Her research interest is in the areas of developmental psychology, social psychology, youth positive development and community psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence can be characterized as a period of drastic changes and growth in terms of physical, emotional and social. At this stage, adolescents engage in many explorations trying to establish an identity for themselves [1]. In doing so, they engage in many risk taking behaviors [2]. Objectively, risk behaviors can be evaluated in terms of potential physical or emotional consequences [3]. In many instances, these risk behaviors are always associated with negative outcomes among adolescents such as sexual risk taking and abusing alcohol [4]. Many studies have also been advocated in looking into these negative aspects of adolescent development [5-8].

Nevertheless, risk behaviors can be categorized in two categories: prosocial risk behavior and health-risk behavior. Prosocial risk behavior is the risk behavior that increases positive outcomes whereas health-risk behaviors are those that increase the negative outcomes. Prosocial risk behaviors such as standing up against a bully are essential for adolescents’ optimal psychological development [4]. This is in line with what is promoted by the positive youth development (PYD), which urges one to look at strengthening adolescents’ strengths instead of focusing on their deficits. PYD focuses on how the ecological environment of adolescents can increase positive behaviors, which also includes the personal characteristics of the adolescents [9].

In the same vein, the current study especially focuses on the role of social environment in promoting positive behaviors among adolescents. Young people’s lives are molded by the social networks that they possess. These networks offer experiences, norms, values and trust, which creates social capital [10]. Via these social network, an individual is able to link or bridge to other individuals or agencies that can provide them with necessary resources. These social networks do not only provide resources but also a sense of belonging and the necessary credentials for adolescents. This belongingness also gives the adolescent an entitlement for the resources that arises from the networks that they have [11]. In other words, social capital may provide resources such as information, economic resources that would not otherwise have.

Social capital can be observed in a structural and cognitive form. Structural form refers to the ties that exist between organizations or individuals: whereas cognitive form consists of norms and values [12]. As such, social capital also consists of feeling safe and trust. Manifestations of social capital also are seen in many layers such as at familial level or community level [13]. It can exist in family bond, peer network and neighborhood [10]. However, in many research, the different dimensions of social capital have been studied separately [14]. Thus, the present study incorporates these different dimensions of social capital as one in regards to prosocial risk behavior. Furthermore, even though many studies have looked into social capital and health-risk behaviors among adolescents [5-8]; only few studies have examined the relationship between social capital and prosocial risk behavior especially among Malaysian adolescents.

Social capital and prosocial risk behaviors

When looking at the structural form of social capital, it is found that linkages to community, friends and family ensure that adolescents are exposed to positive peer, which in turn influence their self-reliance such as making decisions and being helpful [15]. This study was conducted among nonviolent adolescent offenders. In a study shown at [2], it was found that parents play an important role in promoting prosocial risk behaviors such participating in extracurricular activities among Caucasian and Arab-American high school students. Similarly, participation in communal activity also is reported to increase an adolescents’ prosocial behavior. It was found that participation in community of 14 and 15 years old influences their prosocial behavior when one feels valuable via this participation [16].

The elements of social capital such as norms, values and moral principles also seem to influence prosocial risk behavior among adolescents. Two studies conducted among adolescents reported that moral cognition and affect was associated with prosocial behavior and less health risk behavior (e.g. bullying, aggression, delinquency) [17-18].

With these evidences on the influence of social capital on prosocial risk behaviors, the current study aimed to examine if social capital was a predictor of prosocial risk behaviors among Malaysian adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 221 Malaysian secondary school students between the ages of 14 to 17 years old were recruited for this study. About 111 students were aged 14 years old, while 109 of them were 16-years old, and one respondent was 17 years old. These respondents were recruited from five secondary schools from the Selangor state via cluster sampling. The majority of the students were Malays (76.9%) and Muslims (77.8%). In terms of gender distribution, 52% of the participants were female while 47% were males.

Instruments

Youth Social Capital Scale (YSCS)

The YSCS was developed to measure social capital among youth aged between 12 to 20 years old [19]. This self-report instrument consisted of 34 items, which were categorized into seven dimensions: Participation in community (8 items), Youth social agency (6 items), Trust and safety (2 items), Neighborhood connections (4 items), Family and Friends (5 items), Friends (3 items) and Moral principles (6 items). The scores for each subscale can be tabulated by summing up the items response. The overall sum of all the subscale scores will indicate the score for general social capital. The higher the score, the higher the social capital one had [19]. The overall scale and the subscales were found to have acceptable internal consistency with cronbach alpha of 0.5 and above [20].

Prosocial and Health Adolescent Risk Behavior Scale (PHARBS)

The PHARBS was developed with the objective to measure the prosocial and health risk behavior. This measurement consisted of two sections that measured the frequency of risk behavior (Section I) and to what extent adolescents perceived a certain act as risky (Section II). Both section I and II had same set of 25 questions. Each section included three pairs of validity items, in which if the respondent answered at least two pairs inconsistently, their response would be discarded. The prosocial and health risk behavior were two separate subscales that could be used without the other. Hence, in this study on the prosocial risk behavior, participation was used. This measurement had acceptable internal consistency with cronbach alpha above 0.70 [4].

Procedure

The approval of the Malaysian Ministry of Education and respective school principals were obtained before the conduct of this study. The secondary schools were selected by using cluster sampling whereby three districts from the Selangor state were chosen. About 35 to 40 of students were recruited for each age group (14-year-old and 16-year-old) from each school. Prior to distributing the questionnaire to the students, the researchers circulated the parental informed consent forms and collected it back. On the scheduled day with the schools, the researchers distributed the paper-pencil questionnaire to students in the classroom allocated by the school counselor. The researchers briefed the students about the study and were present

throughout the entire time the students were answering the questionnaire. Any questions raised by the students were answered clearly and accurately by the researchers. The respondents took about 35 to 45 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Upon completion, the respondents were given token of appreciation. The data were then processed for analysis.

RESULTS

A simple linear regression was calculated to predict the prosocial risk behavior based on social capital. A significant regression was found ($F(1,219) = 56.386, p < .001$). It was found that social capital ($\beta = .45, t(220) = 7.509$) was a significant predictor of prosocial risk behavior and explained 20.1% of the total variance.

Tab. 1 Prediction of prosocial risk behavior participation from social capital (N=221)

Criterion variable	Predictor variable	F	ΔR^2	df	β	t	p
Model		56.386***	.205	(1,219)			
Prosocial risk behavior participation	Social capital				.452	7.509	.001

Note: *** $p < .001$; * $p < .05$

DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to examine if social capital was a significant predictor of prosocial risk behavior among Malaysian adolescents. The result of the study yielded that social capital is indeed a significant predictor of prosocial risk behavior. This finding resonated with the past studies conducted in the similar field [15-18].

It could be seen that when adolescent were linked with positive adults via participation in community activities, the tendency for them to engage in prosocial risk behavior is higher. This was mainly because these adults themselves were prosocial in nature and hence they affirmed these behaviors among the adolescents [15].

Similarly, when these adolescents had necessary social resources through their connection with community resources such as community activities, there was also higher likelihood that they would meet friends who share the same ideology. Thus indirectly, peers connections as another form social capital could further enhance prosocial risk behavior [15]. Furthermore, the current findings also further strengthened the important role of adults, be it parent or non-parents, in adolescents' positive development. When these adults provide support, encouragement and assistance, adolescents had tendency to be brave to engage in prosocial risk behavior such as standing up for others [21].

In addition, a sense of trust and safety as well as moral principles could also enhance prosocial risk behavior. It could be explained that when the adolescent felt that they were being watched over or protected, they would be more likely to engage in prosocial risk behavior. This was due to the fact that they felt safe that if any trouble rose from this prosocial risk behavior, they would have necessary resources (e.g. adults, peers) to save them. Moreover, trust included positive behavior anticipation from others [22]. As such, adolescents

with higher level of trust would tend to assist, share these expectations, in order to maintain a good reputation [23]. Moral principles that enabled the adolescents to be more relational and emphatic enabled them to be more accepting of other people. This in turn encouraged adolescents to engage in helping and other positive behaviors [24].

CONCLUSION

As a preliminary study result, the paper provided a basic idea about the significance of the role of social capital as a predictor of prosocial risk behavior. Future research need to be directed into dissecting social capital into different dimensions and observe how it influences prosocial risk behaviors. Other variables especially those that may highlight individual differences such as personality may also be studied in relation to prosocial risk behavior. This study had demonstrated the importance of ecological resources (social capital) in producing adolescents' who were willing to engage in prosocial risk behavior. Through, this research we could establish the necessity of family, friends and community together with the cognitive form of social capital that were able to develop adolescents, who could be active agent of change in their own environment. They could be active agents of change, not only leading to the development of more positive behavior but also for better psychological well-being. Most importantly, this study also described an important insight in understanding the prosocial risk behavior of Malaysian adolescents.

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