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Recommended Citation

Strawn, Clare (2002). "Social Capital Influences on Lifelong Learning Among Adults Who Didn't Finish High School," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2002/papers/62>

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Social Capital Influences on Lifelong Learning Among Adults Who Didn't Finish High School

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Abstract: This paper uses data from the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning to investigate how discursive and structural dimensions of social capital influence engagement in learning. The primary finding is that social capital influences formal and informal learning in opposite directions.

Introduction

This paper presents evidence supporting the thesis that multiple dimensions of social capital exist in the personal communities of adults and that these dimensions have different kinds of influence on engagement in lifelong learning. I propose a structuration (Giddens, 1984) model of social capital that emphasizes the agency of adults in constructing their personal communities. This model also introduces local discourse as an interpretive dimension of social capital that explains the directional influences of social capital and the transference of value from the collective to the individual.

These theoretical propositions are tested empirically using data from the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning on a population of adults who did not finish high school. While social capital is a lens for understanding why students drop out in many studies, this is the first examination of the influence of social capital on learning after leaving the institutional context.

Literature

This study builds on two bodies of literature: theoretical and empirical work on social capital and on qualitative studies of adult learning. Coleman's (1988) seminal paper, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital" analyzing community effects on completion of high school instigated a large literature on the relationship between social capital and education (Teachman, et.al. 1996; Sun, 1999; Goldin & Katz, 1999; Perna, 2000; Kahne, et. al., 2001; Croninger & Lee, 2001; Etcheverry, et.al. 2001). As the social capital debate as gained momentum across many social science fields, theoretical problems have been identified including: conflicting definitions of the concept, multiple interpretations of scope and unit of analysis, and a normative bias (Woolcock, 1998; Edwards & Foley, 1997; Lappe & Du Bois, 1997). My contribution to this debate is to draw on critical literacy and discourse theories (Bourdieu, 1974; Gee, 1989; Reder, 1994; Street, 1995) to address these problems (Strawn, 2001). While there isn't room here to review that contribution fully, it underlies the discussion below.

Qualitative studies of communities and of adult learning offer rich data for the development and interpretation of social capital influences on adult learning. Collaborative learning environments and communities of practice suggest that learning itself is a value generated by social capital (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Fingeret & Drennon, 1997). Immigrant communities are usually considered to have bounded solidarity (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993), a quality of closure that builds social capital because of shared language and experience that differentiates them from the dominant culture. However, the social capital of the Mexican immigrant community studied by Delgado-Gaitan (1988) wasn't sufficient in and of itself to

bridge the gap in social structure between it and the school system. The Latina researcher, who was able to stand in both discourse communities, provided a bridge across the social divides necessary for effective collective action. In the model presented below, social capital that crosses social divides is operationalized as knowing someone who went to college.

Another descriptive motif is social capital for “getting by” (Gans, 1982; Stack, 1974; Fingeret, 1983; De Souza Briggs, 1998) in which social support reinforces the survival strategies of marginal communities at the potential expense of individual social mobility. Inclusion or exclusion of “getting ahead with education” in the personal community discourse is the indicator of this scenario in the empirical model. A discourse of resistance to schooling has been hypothesized in some studies and discussions (Quigley, 1994; Ogbu, 1995). While the data instrument was not designed to capture implicit or explicit discourses of resistance in the personal communities of non-participants, there is a measure of trusting in schools as institutions. Finally, the lack of social capital because of social isolation or even a deficit of social support in abusive environments is suggested by Horsman’s (1990) study of women in adult education programs in rural Nova Scotia. The closest indicator of this is in the network category described as small or isolated which is the comparison group for other types of networks.

These stories show that the equation of social capital to educational attainment is not simple and direct. They help to formulate some propositions about how multiple dimensions of social capital interact with socio-economic positioning and how discourse plays a role in the implementation of social capital. People are usually part of multiple social networks and discourse communities. If one is a member of the dominant discourse community, homogeneous social networks work synergistically as social support and leverage. If one is a member of a subordinate discourse community, synergy depends on group and individual strategies for engagement with the dominant discourse. These strategies might be acculturation and adoption of dominant discourse characteristics, pluralistic assertion of difference and self-legitimation, or oppositional attempt to de-legitimize the dominant discourse. Among marginalized communities social capital of support might help overcome barriers by sharing affective and instrumental resources. Social networks might also impose barriers such as family responsibilities, work demands, abusive relationships that limit activities and freedoms, and negative valuation of endeavors. While social capital might be available in a community, its use by the individual may be mediated by the communities discourses about individual mobility and/or education.

Discourse as interpretive dimension of SC solves several theoretical problems: 1) it helps to explain the transfer of value from the group to the individual through alignment of meaning systems; 2) it explains directional value of structural components of social capital – will illustrate with data; 3) it introduces agency into creation of personal community in which discourse is integral to the interactive process; 4) Discourses have differential power according to their role in the structuration of the normative social order, explaining how social capital interfaces with social stratification. Although the following empirical model cannot thoroughly test all of these propositions, I am able to address the following research questions:

1. Does position in macro social structures influence participation in lifelong learning?
2. Does the Education Discourse in personal community influence engagement in lifelong learning?
3. Does social capital influence lifelong learning?
4. Are the influences of Education Discourse mediated by network type?
5. Do different qualities of social capital influence the strategy for lifelong learning?

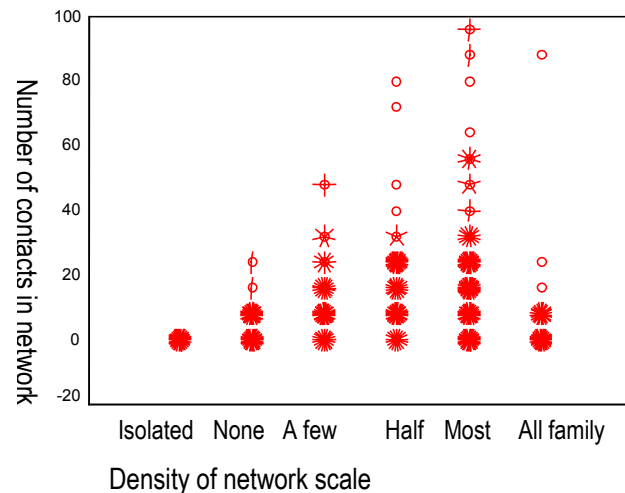
Method

Data for this analysis was collected in 1998-99 for the first wave of the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning. In the Portland area, 940 people between the ages of 18 and 44 who are English proficient and did not graduate from high school or get a GED prior to the beginning of the study were interviewed and given standardized literacy assessments. Half of this sample was drawn from students who have attended at least one ABE or GED preparation class at a local community college. The other half was selected from the general population through random digit dialing and screened to fit the study criteria. The two sample frames are weighted to generalize to the study population as defined above. The sample size is 940.

Two logistic regression models of “Social Capital Influence on Lifelong Learning” (SCILL models) are developed; one testing influences on the probability of participation in formal education and the other one the probability of engagement in informal learning. Formal learning is operationalized as participation in an Adult Basic Education or GED preparation program. Engagement in informal learning is operationalized by a dichotomous variable in which a positive score is learning by reading and at least one of the following: asking someone, learn by doing, educational TV, looking it up at library on or the computer. While formal and informal learning are not mutually exclusive categories, they are not correlated. The Formal and Informal Models are parallel; each have the same independent variables stepped into the model in a sequence of nested theoretical blocks designed to test the research hypotheses. These blocks, are Social Position (P), Education Discourse (D), and Social Capital (S). The constant and control variables (C) will be included in each model.

Preliminary analysis of social capital variables found that the indicators most often used in social capital studies failed to converge into a latent variable of social capital. Therefore, a network structure category was derived from a scatter plot of network size by density to identify potential quantity of social capital. These five categories are 1. isolated, 2. Open, 3. Dense, 4. over 20 and 5. All family.

If social capital is difficult to capture quantitatively, community discourse is as problematic. The strongest indicator of



community discourse regarding education is whether education is named, among other strategies, as a way to get ahead, “In discussions with people you know.” A series of attitudinal questions measures the respondents' values regarding schooling and his or her perception of the values of his or her personal community. The indicator “School trust” was derived from three dichotomous questions about trusting schools to treat people equally (asked regarding the subject and in reference to the personal community).

Social position is operationalized as parent's education, whether the respondent is at or below the federal poverty threshold, whether or not there are children in the household, occupational prestige, gender and language/ethnic/racial group. Age, number of weeks worked in the previous year and literacy proficiency were controlled for as these items could be expected to influence lifelong learning but are not of theoretical importance in this analysis.

The first three hypotheses are tested by rejection of the null hypothesis (at .01 probability) with the introduction of each sequential block. Research question four “Are the influences of Education Discourse mediated by network type?” is addressed by introducing an interaction effect between network and discourse into the main model. Research question five, “Do different qualities of social capital influence the strategy for lifelong learning?” is analyzed by comparing the parameters of the model predicting formal learning strategies to those predicting informal strategies.

Findings

Hypothesis 1 *Position in macro social structures influences individual lifelong learning when controlling for other factors.* The null hypothesis is rejected in both the Formal and Informal models. Social position does influence participation in formal and engagement in informal learning. In this theoretical block, having children in the household and being female are positive predictors of participation in formal programs. With Anglo as the comparison group, race or ethnicity does not influence engagement in lifelong learning except that speakers of English as a second language are more likely to participate in formal programs. Occupational prestige predicts non-participation in formal programs and positively predicts engagement in informal learning strategies. Of the background variables, having children at home and being female are the only predictors significant at .01, predicting odds of 1.5 to 2 times the likelihood of participation respectively.

Hypothesis 2 *Education Discourse influences lifelong learning when controlling for other factors.* The null hypothesis is rejected in the case of formal programs but not rejected in the informal model. When controlling for social position, education discourse appears to influence participation in formal programs, but not engagement in informal programs.

Hypothesis 3 *Social capital influences lifelong learning when controlling for other factors.* The null hypothesis is rejected in both models. In comparison to isolated people or those with small networks, the only network type that predicts formal participation are those comprised entirely of family, which predicts non-participation. The study population with the same all-family configuration is almost five times more likely than isolated people to engage in informal learning. Other indicators of social capital, social trust, duration of longest non-family relationship, knowing someone who went to college and civic participation have no influence on formal participation.

Hypothesis 4 *The predictive power of Education Discourse is strengthened by interaction with dense networks.* The null is rejected in the Formal model, but cannot be rejected in the model predicting engagement in informal learning. Looking at the main effects Formal model, the dense network is an insignificant predictor of non-participation. In the interaction model, members of dense networks with the discourse of "getting ahead with education" are more than twice more likely to participate than members of small networks with this discourse. This is a reversal of direction and large size effect relative to other predictors in the model. The remaining odds for dense networks, which now indicate personal communities without the getting ahead with education discourse, predicts a 70% less likelihood of participation than small networks. The other network types are unaffected and the remaining parameter for "getting ahead with education" becomes insignificant, suggesting that all of its power lies in its interaction with dense networks. The interaction of network type and discourse does not influence engagement in informal learning.

Hypothesis 5 *Different dimensions of social capital influence the strategies of engagement of lifelong learning.* This hypothesis is evaluated by comparing the parameters of the final models. The primary finding is that dimensions of social capital influence engagement in formal and informal learning in nearly opposite directions. After adding the interaction effect of discourse and network structure, dense networks and all-family networks predict non-participation in formal programs. However, when compared against the “isolated” case, all network categories predict engagement in non-formal learning strategies. The most significant is the all-family category for which the odds of engagement are 3.6 times that of isolated individuals. Dense networks that have the discourse of education as a way to get ahead predict participation in formal programs, but the interaction effect is not predictive of engagement in formal learning. Other social capital indicators follow the pattern of opposite effects. Duration of relationship predicts engagement in non-formal learning but is not significant for formal learning. Knowing college educated people, expected to represent the bridging potential of social capital that would encourage participation in formal programs, is a significant predictor of non-participation, but less so when the interaction effect of discourse is introduced.

Another surprising finding of this multivariate analysis is that expected predictors of participation in ABE and GED programs add very little to the strength of the overall model. Literacy proficiency is not significant. Age, number of weeks worked in the past year and parents’ education are significant at only the .05 level, with very little effect size. The overall model does not have strong predictive power (Formal $N-r^2 = .191$ and Informal $N-r^2 = .153$). This is partially due to the lack of significant effects of control and background variables which commonly carry most of the explanatory weight. The model is sufficiently robust to evaluate theoretical hypotheses however.

Discussion

The relationship between social capital and learning is not as linear or as simple as the example used by Coleman (1988) when he initially introduced this thinking in “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital.” Some of Coleman’s findings and the contributions of scholars over the last 15 years are confirmed in this study, and some are challenged. The operative elements of social capital in this analysis are networks characterized by density and size, and indicators of shared discourses. Like Coleman’s study of dropping out, social capital indicators are the most powerful predictors of engagement in learning for adults, all else constant.

There is little evidence that the study population benefits from social capital of leverage. The potential measures of leverage, knowing someone who has been to college, parent’s education, or occupation prestige, do not predict participation in adult education. In fact, knowing someone who went to college significantly predicts *non*-participation in ABE which is the opposite direction from what would be expected if the leverage mechanism of social capital were at work. There are at least two possible explanations for this relationship. It is possible that community discourse changes with the influence of college educated people. This possibility is supported by the data, which show that when the interaction of discourse on “education as a way to get ahead” with dense network is introduced, knowing college educated people has less predictive power. Another interpretation is that social capital substitutes for human capital such that when one knows someone who went to college, one relies on their information and status instead of taking steps to develop one’s own human capital. Schuller and Field (1998) and Fingeret (1983) suggest that social capital may be drawn on as a buffer for the lack of human capital certification (i.e.: high school diploma or GED). This interpretation helps clarify the finding of the SCILL Model

that social capital predicts non-participation in Formal learning strategies. For example, if people can get jobs through personal connections, either relatives or friends, their educational attainment may not be as important a consideration. In fact, 42% of the study population in the workforce got their current or most recent job through a friend or relative, rather than from eight other possible sources listed in the instrument.

The most dramatic difference between the models of Formal and Informal learn strategies is in how networks predict participation. Social capital theory led me to expect that social capital represents available information, encouragement and resources to support participation in formal programs. This expectation is proved inaccurate. The discursive dimensions of personal community hold more predictive power than the potential instrumental support of structural dimensions. Participating in Formal education is a much more public endeavor than reading alone to learn about something or practicing on one's own to get a GED. As a public endeavor it is more vulnerable to the approval or sanctions of community. This is demonstrated in the SCILL Model by the interaction effect.

Network configurations expected to operationalize support, characterized by density, horizontal ties and homogeneity are not evident in the data. An alternate way of investigating the mechanisms of support and leverage is through the interaction between density and discourse. The SCILL Model supports this approach empirically. All-Family networks and dense networks are hypothesized to most influence behavior in the direction of the shared discourse. In the usual interpretation of "support", one would expect All-Family networks to support participation, which is not the case. All-Family networks predict non-participation and are more likely to *not* discuss getting ahead with education. Dense networks, which are as likely to discuss getting ahead with education as not, are not significant predictors of participation or non-participation. When Dense networks also have the discourse of education as a way to get ahead, subjects are more than twice as likely to participate in Formal education than people in Small networks that also discuss getting ahead with education.

This evidence supports the argument that social capital influences behavior through the function of community discourse, constructed and reinforced by relatively closed networks. The interpretative dimension of social capital gives insight into "support for what?" which allows prediction of the direction taken by the actors in the discourse community.

This study was supported by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy through a grant from the Office of Education Research and Improvement.

References available upon request from the author.