

Social Networks of Vulnerable Young Adults in Canada

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Abstract

In Canada, one of the population groups considered to be vulnerable to poverty is “young adults”. This is particularly true for young Canadians whose parents belong to low socio-economic status. In our previous studies, we found that the transition to adulthood of this group is fraught with difficulties particularly in the pursuit and completion of post-secondary education, which in turn affects their entry into the labour force and formation of their own families. We also found that their social capital is smaller in comparison to young adults with parents of high social status. Despite these vulnerabilities, there are young adults who are resilient – they manage to adapt positively to adversities. Social networks are instrumental to resilience not only of children, who are the subject of most studies on resilience, but of adults as well.

Using the Canadian General Social Survey on Social Networks conducted by Statistics Canada in 2008, we examine the role of social networks in helping young adults aged 20-34 overcome their initial disadvantage of growing up with limited material resources. The survey gathered information about informal networks (composed of family, relatives, and neighbours) and about confidence in institutions (such as the justice, education, and health systems). Our analysis starts with 3649 young men and women aged 20 to 34 years old, determining their parental social status and education and work outcomes. We then focus on those with low parental social status, identifying those who are more resilient than others. Using measures of social networks that we have found useful in our previous studies, we compare differences in social networks in terms of the network size, density, trust, and diversity between those identified as resilient and those who continue to have difficulties. We conclude with discussion of policy implications of our findings.

Extended Abstract

Vulnerable Groups in Canada

Six population groups have been identified as having a greater risk of poverty in Canada: the five groups identified by Hatfield (2004) – lone parents, unattached persons aged 45-64, recent immigrants, persons with work-limiting disabilities, and Aboriginal populations – and a sixth group, young adults, identified by the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (2009). In “Low income status by population groups, 1961-2001,” Beaujot, Liu and Kerr (2010) document the extensive change in the groups at higher risk of having low income from 1961, when it was first measured in the census, to 2001, noting the increased vulnerability especially of one-earner young families with children. In spite of their vulnerabilities, many individuals do manage to deal with the risks and overcome their disadvantages. Our research examines resilience, defined as the ability to adapt positively to adversity (Masten, 1994; Werner, 1994; Luthar et al., 2000; Patterson, 2002; Lamond et al., 2008), and the factors and conditions under which some individuals are more resilient compared to others in similar circumstances.

Among the identified vulnerable groups, our research program concentrates on young adults, lone parents, and unattached men and women at ages 45-64. We examine the factors contributing to resilience at adult stages of the life course: in *early adulthood* – young adults in low social class as they make their transition to adulthood; in *mid adulthood* – lone parents as they raise their children and balance their family and work life; and in *later adult life* – men and women as they cope with detachment from family. In this paper, we focus on vulnerable young adults, exploring the role that social networks play particularly in their education and work outcomes.

Social Status and Transition to Adulthood

Among the family changes observed in Canada from around the late 1980s is a trend toward polarization of families, generally described from women’s vantage point: on one end are two-parent families, where the woman has acquired education and a career, married an equally educated man with stable job, and become a mother at an age when economic stability of the couple has been reached. On the other end are single-parent families, usually headed by a woman with low education, had not established a career before marrying (or more likely, cohabiting), had a child at an early age, and subsequently separated or divorced (Lochhead, 2000; Ravanera and Rajulton, 2006).

Studies using Canadian data show that parental investment is one of the major factors affecting the trend. Parental resources influence the children’s transition to adulthood, with early life events, specifically schooling and entry into labour force, affecting later life events such as marriage and onset of parenthood. Rajulton, Ravanera, and Burch (2008), using longitudinal data from the first panel of Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics, show that parental social class makes a difference in the children’s timing and pace of transition to adulthood. For

instance, 10% of the men from families belonging to high social class complete their post-secondary education at 21.7 years of age, and 50% of them finished at 25.9 years old (a gap of 4 years). The pace is slower for men from low social class families – the first 10% complete post-secondary education at 22.5 and 50% of them do so at 31.3 years old (a difference of 9 years). Differences by parental social class also holds for entry into the labour force but in contrast to completion of schooling, men in low social class start working regularly at a younger age – possibly because of the need to do so; that is, by 16.2 years old 10% of them have had a regular job, whereas this occurs a year later for men in high social class families. The pattern in the timing of school completion and labour force entry of women is largely similar to that of men. This pattern by social class is similar to the findings using data from the 2001 Canadian General Social Survey. For instance, Ravanera and Rajulton (2006) found that women whose parents have high social status are more likely to have delayed their entry into motherhood, having first completed post-secondary education. In contrast, women from family with low social status are more likely to become mothers at a younger age, often without first completing post-secondary education or having a period of regular full-time work.

It does seem clear that young adults whose parents belong to low social class are vulnerable to experiencing difficulties in their transition to adulthood. However, it is also likely that many of them overcome their difficulties and experience their transition in better shape than predicted by their parental social status. The first task of our paper then is to determine the proportion of young adults who are able to transcend the difficulties posed by the lack of parental resources as they make their transition to adulthood.

Social Networks of Young Adults

Common to the various frameworks that guide the study of resilience is the emphasis of multiple levels of influence, namely the level of the community, the family, and the individual (Luthar, et al., 2000; Saint-Jacques, 2009). An ecological perspective points to interaction between the individual (developing child) and the contexts (such as culture, neighbourhood, and family) wherein he/she is embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Cicchetti and Lynch, 1993), implying the importance of social networks (or social capital) in resilience of children.

While parental social capital has been shown to have positive impact on children's outcome, including that on education of young adults (see for example, Sandefur, Meier, and Campbell, 2005), in this paper we focus on the social capital of the young adults themselves.

In a study using data from the Canadian General Social Survey on Social Engagement conducted by Statistics Canada in 2003, we found that family structure and social class have impact on young adults' social capital, measured in terms of both informal networks (such as number of and trust in friends, relatives and neighbours) and formal institutions (such as membership in organizations and confidence in government institutions). Compared to teens (aged 15-19) in intact family, teens in lone parent families have fewer friends and relatives and have lower trust in their neighbours (Ravanera, Rajulton, and Beaujot, 2008). Likewise, those living with step- or lone-parents have significantly fewer organizations they are members of, lower trust in people in

general, and weaker confidence in government and business institutions. As for the effect of social status, we found that the higher the social status, the more friends and relatives the teens have and the higher level of trust in neighbours. The effects of social status on the informal networks seen for teenagers, are also evident among young people aged 20-29. The higher the social status, the greater are the number of relatives and friends and the number of neighbours known.

In this paper, we do a similar analysis of social capital of young adults and how it differs by parental social class, this time using data gathered 5 years later through the 2008 General Social Survey on Social Networks. In this study, we determine the proportion of young adults whose social capital is greater than expected given the low social class of their parents.

Through appropriate statistical techniques, we examine the relationship between social capital and youth outcome, comparing the levels of social capital of young adults who succeed in spite of adversities, with those whose outcomes are as predicted by their low parental social class.

Data and Methods

The Canadian General Social Survey on Social Networks conducted in 2008 by Statistics Canada is useful for understanding the roles of social capital in family life transitions as it gathered data on informal networks of friends, relatives and neighbours (including their numbers, frequency of contacts, and diversity in terms of education, income and ethnicity), and on formal networks (including participation in organizations through volunteering, charitable giving and engagement, and knowledge of service providers). The survey also asked question on values, life satisfaction, trust and reciprocity, and confidence in various social institutions (such the police, school system, and health care system) (Statistics Canada, 2010).

The target population included all persons 15 years and older in Canada excluding residents of Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, and full-time residents of institutions. There were 20,401 respondents to the survey, of which 3649 were aged 20-34, the subject of this paper.

Variable Measurement

“Social networks”, the term that we use interchangeably with social capital, and “resilience” are two concepts, the measurement of which are not as straightforward as the other variables used in our study.

Social Networks

The definition and measurement of social capital are contentious. For the purpose of doing empirical research such as ours, we find that “social capital” defined as “**networks** of social relations characterized by norms of trust and reciprocity” (Stone, Gray, and Hughes, 2003) most amenable to measurement. Stone and Hughes (2002: 2) distinguish three types of networks: a) *informal ties* with kin, families, friends, neighbours, and workmates; b) *generalized relationships*

with local people, people in civic groups, and people in general; and, c) *relationships through institutions*. They also identified dimensions of networks, which include size and extensiveness (for example, number of neighbours personally known), density and closure (that is, whether network members know each other), and diversity (ethnic, education, and cultural mix of networks).

We make use of a number of variables available from the survey to measure social capital through informal networks and generalized ties, and through formal civic organizations and institutions (Ravanera, 2007; Ravanera and Rajulton, 2010). Whenever there are several variables that could be used as indicators, we do factor analysis to derive more parsimonious measures. (See Appendix A for the variables that we use to measure social networks)

Resilience

We will test various measures of resilience, one of which would be using age-related expectation in education and work. Thus, for example, we would expect for each 5-year age group the following:

- At age 20-24 – have graduated from high school, enrolled or have completed post-secondary education
- At age 25-29 – have completed post-secondary education, have started full-time regular work
- At age 30-34 – have completed post-secondary education, have had full-time regular work for at least a certain period, say 3 years

Young people whose parents belong to low social status but nevertheless able to attain the normative expectation for their age-group could be considered resilient. We would also try using regression techniques and deriving predicted values from the coefficients to determine who among the vulnerable young adults are resilient.

Other Variables

In our multivariate analysis, we will make use of several control variables. Variables that will be brought into our analysis (in addition to those already mentioned) include: family structure, place of residence, immigrant and visible minority statuses, mother tongue, religion and religiosity, and length of stay in the neighbourhood – factors found to influence social capital. Likewise, we will supplement our statistical analysis with insights from the responses to the questions on the help received by the individuals from their various networks. (These questions were asked only of those who experienced major life changes in the year before the survey.)

Policy Implications

Based on the result of our analysis, we will discuss policies that could be considered to promote resilience among young adults with greater vulnerabilities. Our analysis of both informal networks and confidence in formal organizations and institutions will be useful for this purpose.

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Appendix A: Variables for Measuring Social Capital

A. Size of networks:

- (1) Factor score of number of friends and relatives, derived from:
 - (a) How many relatives do you have who you feel close to?
 - (b) How many close friends do you have, that is, people who are not your relatives, but who you feel at ease with, can talk to about what is on your mind, or call on for help?
 - (c) How many other friends do you have who are not relatives or close friends?
- (2) Would you say that you know: most, many, a few, or nobody else in your neighbourhood?

B. Trust and Reciprocity:

- (3) How much do you trust: people in your family?
- (4) How much do you trust: people in your workplace or school?
- (5) Factor score of trust in neighbours, derived from:
 - (a) How much do you trust: people in your neighbourhood?
 - (b) Would you say that you trust: most, many, a few, or nobody else in your neighbourhood?
 - (c) If you lost a wallet or purse that contained two hundred dollars, how likely is it to be returned with the money in it if it was found by someone who lives close by?
 - (d) Would you say this neighbourhood is a place where neighbours help each other?

C. Diversity of Friends:

- (6) Factor score of social status diversity, derived from:

Think of all the friends you had contact with in the past month, whether the contact was in person, by telephone, or by e-mail. Of all these people:

 - (a) ... how many have roughly the same level of education as you?
 - (b) ...how many are from a similar family income level as you?
 - (c) ...how many are in the same age group as you?
- (7)...how many come from an ethnic group that is visibly different from yours?

D. Membership in Civic Organizations

(8) Membership in Primordial Organizations, derived from sum of responses to:

In the past 12 months, were you a member or participant in a ...

- (a) religious-affiliated group (such as church youth group, choir)?
- (b) school group, neighbourhood, civic or community association (such as PTA, alumni, block parents, neighbourhood watch)?

(9) Membership in Purposive Organizations, derived from sum of responses to:

In the past 12 months, were you a member or participant in a ...

- (a) union or professional association?
- (b) political party or group?
- (c) sports or recreation organization (such as hockey league, health club, golf club)?
- (d) cultural, education or hobby organization (such as theatre group, book club or bridge club)?
- (e) service club or fraternal organization (such as Kiwanis, Knights of Columbus, the Legion)?
- (f) any other type of organization that you have not mentioned?

E. Diversity of Organization Members

(10) Factor score of social status diversity, derived from:

Thinking of all the people you met through this organization,

- (a) ... how many have roughly the same level of education as you?
- (b) ...how many are from a similar family income level as you?
- (c) .. how many are in the same age group as you?

(11) ... how many come from an ethnic group that is visibly different from yours?

F. Trust and Reciprocity in People in General

(12) Factor score of trust in people in general, derived from:

- (a) Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?
- (b) How much do you trust strangers?
- (c) If you lost a wallet or purse that contained two hundred dollars, how likely is it to be returned with the money in it if it was found: by a complete stranger?

G. Confidence in Institutions

(13) Confidence in government institutions, factor score derived from:

How much confidence do you have in ... (a) the police, (b) the justice system/courts, (c) health care system, (d) school system, (e) federal parliament

(14) Confidence in business institutions, factor score derived from:

How much confidence do you have in ... (a) banks, (b) major corporations, (c) local merchants and business people.