

Measuring Social Capital Among First-Generation and Non-First-Generation, Working-Class, White Males



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Entry into college can be a stressful transition that involves social, emotional and academic adjustments for many adolescents, and especially challenging for students from low-income backgrounds or those who are first in their families to attend college. Low-income and first-generation students may lack basic knowledge about college, including degree expectations and planning, expenses and funding, and career preparation (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004), placing them at risk for poor adjustment and persistence. For example, students from working class backgrounds whose parents did not attend college are at high risk for dropping out of college, similar to their risk for dropping out of high school (Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004; Croninger & Lee, 2001).

The Value of Relationships

Social capital is a useful theory for understanding the experiences of working class, first-generation college students. Social capital is the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in a given social situation (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). According to social capital theory, networks of relationships can aid students in managing an otherwise unfamiliar environment (Attinasi, 1989) by providing students with valuable information, guidance and emotional support (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Differences in academic engagement and persistence in college may be explained by differences in the quality and quantity of social networks that students are able to access.

To date, a great deal of research on social capital in education has been aimed at understanding how socioeconomic status is associated with difficulties in high school (e.g., Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Axinn, Duncan, & Thornton, 1997; Hauser & Sweeny, 1997) particularly among ethnic minority students (e.g., Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Attinasi, 1989; Monkman, Ronald & Therament, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). For example, Stanton-Salazar (2001) found that Latino students reported a lack of social and academic support from teachers and peers, and a feeling of being disconnected as reasons for dropping out of high school. Similarly, Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch (1995) found that genuinely supportive relationships with institutional agents (including peers) were related to academic success among low-income, Latino students. These findings, while providing important information about the benefits of social capital for educational success, are limited by a focus on high school and on ethnic minority students.

Once in college, a student's socioeconomic status (SES) and parental education also influence social capital (Astin,

1984; Attinasi, 1989; Pascarella et al., 2004, Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Students from high SES backgrounds typically enjoy social networks that provide them with social support and both emotional and tangible resources (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). College-educated parents are often able to aid their children, both by direct teaching and by example, in understanding the culture of higher education and its role in future life chances (e.g., Pascarella et al., 2004). Students whose parents did not attend college seem to benefit from participation in extracurricular activities and social interactions with non-first-generation peers. These peer interactions have been shown to significantly enhance motivation, degree plans, intellectual development, and personal growth (Pascarella, et al., 2004). Talking to faculty outside of class and working on research with a professor also increased low-income students' probability of graduating and attending graduate school (Walpole, 2003). However, Walpole (2003) also indicates that these students tend to report lower involvement in on-campus activities and lower GPA's when compared to their high SES peers. As these findings make clear, the college experience itself, which includes academic and social engagement, is able to provide access to additional social capital in the form of networks and resources that can be especially helpful for both low-income and first-generation students (Etcheverry, Clifton, & Roberts, 2001; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

This study examined the effects of socioeconomic and first-generation status on social capital among working-class, white, male students. We measured social capital by assessing the number and the quality of students' ties to institutional agents. Institutional agents are defined as individuals who have the ability to transmit or negotiate the transmission of opportunities and resources available at the institution (e.g. mentoring, counseling, tutoring) (Stanton-

Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). We included two types of students: (a) working-class males who are first-generation college students (e.g. Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996; Pascarella et al., 2004) and (b) working-class students whose parents attended college.

The Power of Gender

Additional research investigating first-generation, white, working-class, male students is needed, as these young men are underrepresented in college and have few or no dedicated support services. Many studies have illustrated that gender has an impact on student's access to social networks. Female students are more likely than males to seek out both parental and institutional support (Flacks & Thomas, 1998; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991; Kraft, 1991). Some work has found that almost all female students (93 percent) but less than two-thirds (60 percent) of males believe that social support is important to their academic success. Men also reported a preference for personal actions to solve academic problems, while female students reported that they sought faculty support (Kraft, 1991). Similar studies have found that male students participated in fewer activities overall than females (Hu & Kuh, 2001). Collectively, these studies illustrate that females seek out institutional support thus acquiring social capital, while male students are at a disadvantage in accessing and acquiring social capital.

Only a handful of studies that examine the value of relationships in higher education explore the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Flacks and Thomas (1998) found that white males had lower levels of engagement in campus activities than black and Chicano males, and women of all groups. More recently, Hu & Kuh (2001) also found that white male students were most likely to be "disengaged." These studies suggest that white males may be at risk for accessing social networks because they infrequently participate in activities on campus. Fewer activities on campus limit the amount of social capital these students gain while in college.

In interviews with working-class, white, male college students (Whiting, 1999), students complained that there were "too many unfamiliar people" on-campus, that they felt like they did not belong and that the large campus was difficult to understand. These findings imply that working-class, white males may experience the same difficulties adjusting to college life as their working-class, ethnic-minority peers. However, most

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underrepresented students have access to institutional agents through ethnic studies, women's studies and sexual minority centers and programs. Low-income or first-generation, white males must often navigate new territory on their own.

Hypothesis

Based on social capital theory, the study included variables related to social relationships that low-income, white male students have formed with institutional agents (i.e., professors, counselors, classmates, teaching assistants, and student services). First-generation students were expected to have less communication with institutional agents overall. They were also expected to encounter a more restricted set of agents for social and academic support than their non-first-generation peers. Also, quantity and type of social capital were suspected to be associated with GPA levels and expectations about their future—the amount of communication with institutional academic and social support agents and the variety of agents being positively related to GPA levels for all students. Finally, amount of communication and the variety of agents accessed were expected to be associated with more optimistic expectations about the future for both first-generation and non-first-generation students.

Method

Sample

Participants (N=35) were white, male, freshmen students with yearly family incomes ranging from \$20,000–\$59,000, attending a university in the southeastern U.S. First-generation students represented 49 percent (n=17) of the sample and non-first-generation 51 percent (n=18).

Students indicated whether they went to the following people for help with coursework: (a) professors, (b) graduate teaching assistants, (c) friends at school, (d) students in your classes, or (e) your colleges tutoring service.

Procedures

Students were recruited via email to participate in a 39-item, Web-based questionnaire on college experiences, perceived academic support and social networks. To ensure privacy, participants received a unique password that allowed them to access the survey instrument posted on a secure Web site. Once accessed, the survey had to be completed in a single setting, and students reported that the survey required 20–30 minutes to complete.

Measures

Communication with institutional agents. Students were asked to rate how often they communicated with institutional agents (i.e., “How often do you discuss your college experiences with: professors, friends at school, classmates, college counselors?”) during their first semester on a four-point scale (1 = Never, 4 = A great deal). Ratings for the six questions were summed to create a single index ($\alpha = .72$).

Institutional assistance. Students indicated whether they went to the following people for help with coursework: (a) professors, (b) graduate teaching assistants, (c) friends at school, (d) students in your classes, or (e) your colleges tutoring service. For analyses, “yes” responses were summed for each student as a measure of social capital accessed for help with coursework. The students were also asked to indicate whether or not they went to the following people for social and emotional support: (a) college friends, (b) professors, (c) graduate teaching assistants, (d) student services. Again, “yes” responses were summed for each student as a measure of social capital for emotional support.

Grade point average. We measured self-reported GPA with four-point scale anchors: (1 = 3.8 or higher, 4 = 2.8 or lower). Scores were reverse coded such that higher codes indicated higher grade-point averages.

Expectations towards the future. Students indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with, “My future is limited.” Responses were measured on a four-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree).

Results

Because the sample size was small and the responses may not have been normally distributed, a non-parametric version of the t-test, the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test, was used to analyze differences between our two groups.

Comparisons of First-Generation and Non-First-Generation, Working Class, White Participants

Hypotheses one expected working-class, first-generation, white males to report less communication overall with institutional agents. Although group differences were not significant, a strong trend emerged ($Z = -1.806$, $p = .07$) suggesting that first-generation students perhaps communicate less than their peers (see Table 1).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Social Capital Accessed by First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Students

Social Capital Variable	First-Generation	Non-First-Generation
Communication about Experiences	13.00+	15.28+
	(3.60)	(3.34)
Coursework help	1.94	1.83
	(1.43)	(1.47)
Emotional Support	0.76	0.72
	(0.43)	(0.89)
Note: First-generation n = 17, Non-first-generation n = 18		
+p < .10		

Hypotheses two predicted that first-generation students would access fewer institutional agents for social emotional support and help with coursework than their first-generation peers. No significant differences were found between first-generation and non-first-generation students on the variety of agents accessed for help with coursework ($Z = -.169$, *ns*) or for social and emotional support ($Z = -.780$, *ns*).

Correlations Among Social Capital Predictors and Outcomes

Hypothesis three predicted that higher levels of communication with institutional agents about college experiences, as well as greater variety of agents accessed to help with coursework, and provide social or emotional support would be positively related to GPA. Correlations revealed that communication with institutional agents and institutional help with coursework were more strongly related to GPA outcomes for both first-generation and non-first-generation students than institutional social and emotional support (see Table 2).

Table 2. Association of GPA with Types of Social Capital by First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Student Status

Social capital variable	Grouping Variable	
	First-generation	Non-first-generation
Communication with Institutional agents	.63**	.49*
Coursework help	.72***	.66**
Emotional Support	.43	-.04

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Hypothesis four expected higher levels of communication with institutional agents about college experiences and greater variety of agents accessed for help with coursework and social emotional support would be positively related to more optimism toward the future for all students. All three social capital predictor variables were related to expectations towards the future for first-generation students but not for their non-first-generation peers (see Table 3).

Table 3. Association of Expectations Towards the Future with Types of Social Capital by First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Student Status

Social Capital Variable	First-Generation	Non-First-Generation
Communication with Institutional agents	.62	.07
Coursework help	.72**	.31
Emotional Support	.74***	.27

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Discussion

The study expected first-generation status to be associated with working class, white males having less communication with institutional agents about their college experiences. Although not supported at a level of statistical significance, the data showed a trend supporting the hypothesis. This trend is consistent with Stanton-Salazar's (2001) findings that non-first-generation student's pre-college social networks provided them with insights on how to seek help when needed and how to negotiate access to campus support and resources. Working class, first-generation males may be less likely to access institutional agents once on campus.

Contrary to the second hypothesis, both groups of students reported accessing fewer than two institutional agents for social emotional support and help with coursework. Because the study was limited to working class, white males, this finding may indicate that white, working class males access a more limited range of institutional agents, regardless of first-generation status. These results are consistent with previous research that found white male students to have lower levels of engagement in college (Flacks and Thomas, 1998; Hu & Kuh, 2001). One possible explanation is that males seek out institutional support less than their female peers and tend to prefer to do things on their own (Hu & Kuh, 2001; Flacks & Thomas, 1998; Kalsner & Pistole, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). As well, working class students often face economic burdens which may mean spending more time working and less time on campus accessing institutional agents. This population may also access fewer social agents because there are far fewer programs and institutional staff devoted to low income or working-class, first-generation, white males. Additional research on this population is warranted, given that fewer males of all ethnicities and races are being admitted to college (Jacob, 2002).

The hypotheses that higher levels of communication with institutional agents and greater variety of agents accessed would be positively related to GPA levels for both first-generation and non-first-generation students were partially confirmed. Increased levels and greater variety were related to higher college GPA for both first-generation and non-first-generation students. These findings are consistent with the literature showing that social capital is linked to academic performance (Attinasi, 1989; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). However, access to institutional agents for social emotional support was not linked to GPA for either group, suggesting that institutional agents may serve academic but not social functions for working-class, white males. However, the small sample size may have limited these findings.

The most important finding emerges from the final hypothesis, which predicted that communication and access to social agents would be associated with expectations towards the future for both first-generation and non-first-generation students. Significant correlations were found between the three types of social capital and expectations toward the future for first-generation students only. Communication with institutional agents is tied to the beliefs of first-generation students, but not students with college-experienced parents. This finding suggests

that working class, first-generation students either access institutional agents more frequently if they have high aspirations for the future, or that contact raises students' aspirations. The results of the correlational analyses are similar to past findings that out-of-class contacts with professors and peers had a positive influence on students' views of their environment, internal locus of control, degree plans, personal, and intellectual development (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). The present findings are especially significant because they illustrate that social capital may hold more value for first-generation, working class, white males than it does for their non-first-generation peers.

Limitations and Implications

A more adequate test of the hypotheses, regarding effects of first-generation status among low income, white males, requires a much larger and more representative sample. A broader representation of low SES income ranges would allow more nuanced analyses of within-group variability for this population. However, the small sample may also be an indication of how underrepresented this population is on college campuses. Another limitation is that this one-time assessment does not allow careful observation of causal relationships. Future research should follow students throughout their college careers. Additionally, all of the data for the study were derived from self-report measures, raising questions of validity.

Although the results suffer from a small sample size, these students represent an underrepresented group in higher education. Students from various underrepresented backgrounds have access to valuable institutional agents through specialized centers and programs, while low-income and working class, white males may access fewer institutional agents because there are fewer opportunities for them to do so. Additional research that is conducted at the few institutions providing programs for lower-income or working class, first-generation students, regardless of their ethnic background, may provide clear direction for the development of unique programs to serve this population. Our findings suggest that, at a minimum, these students should be encouraged to connect with institutional agents through email invitations, faculty outreach or other activities, as soon as they are admitted to campus. The concern for equity and access must be extended to all eligible students in an effort to assure the country of an educated, capable workforce into the foreseeable future.

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