Enhancing Youth Civic Engagement and Generalized Trust Through Bonding Social Capital among Friends

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ABSTRACT
Social capital among close friends is the norms of trust and reciprocity shared by a group of friends within multi-stranded networks. This research investigated the factors that contribute to the levels of friendship social capital. It also analyzed whether friendship social capital was associated with participation in voluntary associations and whether those who reported high levels of social capital with their friends also reported higher levels of generalized trust in the wider society. Through an online survey of young Australian residents aged 16 to 25 (N=283) closed networks were found to be associated with very high levels of social capital among friends. Further, those with very high levels of friendship social capital were more likely to participate in organized groups and to report high levels of generalized social capital than those with lower levels of friendship social capital. Thus, promoting friendship networks of young people could benefit society more broadly by fostering participation in voluntary activities and generalized social capital.

Keywords: Social capital, young people, network, friendship, generalized trust

INTRODUCTION
Social capital consists of the norms of trust and reciprocity shared by a group of people (Putnam, 1993). The literature on social capital among friends mainly focuses on how friendship networks can help individuals in job searches (Davern and Hachen, 2006; De Graaf and Flap, 1988; Flap and De Graaf, 1986; Montgomery, 1992; Stone et al., 2003). This trend in the literature on friendship networks can be traced back to Granovetter’s (1973) idea of ‘the strength of weak ties’. Granovetter asserted that weak ties are more advantageous in job-searching and getting information than are strong ties. This is because building weak ties require less time and effort than the formation of strong ties and weak ties are more likely to link people into different networks than are strong ties. Indeed Granovetter’s weak ties could be taken as an early reference to bridging social capital. Putnam (2000) introduced the concept of bridging social capital as a feature of open networks (i.e., networks that connect people ‘across diverse social cleavages’).

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There is a lack of research on social capital among close friends. The type of social capital shared by close friends can be described as bonding social capital. Bonding social capital is social capital that is developed and reinforced in homogenous groups which share the same identity in ‘repeated, intensive, multistranded networks’ like family and friendship relationships (Putnam, 2000). The term multistranded here refers to the inter-connections in close friendship groups where most or all of the members are mutual friends. In such networks, the linkages are not centered only on one member of the network because all members are connected. Close friends in the same network develop norms that enable them to trust in and reciprocate with one another, because norms can be imposed more easily in a closed network than an open network (Coleman, 1988).

There is evidence that individuals who are more trusting are more likely to engage in social activities than are those who are less trusting (Green and Brock, 1998; Chong et al., 2011). Voluntary associations are an important part of communities. Voluntary associations are those where people “acting voluntarily and collectively to serve their own interests or those of others, without seeking personal financial benefit” (Passey and Lyons, 2005). Voluntary associations are major service providers of community, sport and recreation, education, health care, the arts, and religious worship (Passey and Lyons, 2005). They are central to Australian life, based on the fact that there are 700,000 voluntary associations in Australia and just under two-thirds of the population belonged to at least one voluntary association in 1997 (Passey and Lyons, 2005). In fact, the 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) showed that 86% of respondents were then members of at least one voluntary association (Passey and Lyons, 2005).

In general there are two types of membership in an organized group: active and passive. Putnam (2000) documents a decline in generalized social capital in the USA by showing that Americans have stopped attending meetings of social organizations. If they belong to civic organizations now, it is as passive members who only send in their membership fees or make donations (Putnam, 2000). Putnam (2000) argues that passive members are no different to non-members in terms of their contribution to social capital, because in both there is a lack of face-to-face socialization in cultivating norms of trust and reciprocity. Active members are those who effectively perform a range of volunteer tasks for the association in order for the association to operate. Office holders are the very active members who take legal responsibility for their association, and perform governance activities (Passey and Lyons, 2005). The AuSSA 2003 found that a majority of members of voluntary organizations were passive, not taking an active involvement in the organization (Passey and Lyons, 2005).

There is evidence that members of organized groups are more trusting and more engaged with civil society (Passey and Lyons, 2005; Stolle, 1998), but previous research has not specifically looked at whether this is the case for young people. It is possible that young group members’ close friends would also be members of the same organized groups. Active participation in organized groups might be a way to enhance their friendship by creating more opportunities for them to interact with one another. In this article the researchers test whether Putnam’s (2000) theory that there is a positive relationship between association memberships and generalized trust is accurate for young Australians. The researchers ask whether active membership in organized groups affect the level of trust and reciprocity members have in their friendship groups.

The term generalized social capital relates to a generalized trust in and reciprocity with other people (including strangers) in the wider society. Generalized trust and reciprocity is an extension of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000), and according to him, generalized trust is strongly related to other forms of civic engagement social capital. Chong (2007) also argues that social capital among neighbors is related to generalize trust. In this article the researchers investigate whether having high levels of friendship...
social capital was associated with high levels of generalized trust for our young Australian participants. If high friendship social capital is linked with high generalized social capital, it will suggest that fostering friendship social capital in young people would benefit society. It would indicate that young people who build social capital with their close friends are likely to extend their interpersonal trust and reciprocity to people whom they meet in daily life.

The literature indicates that social capital is important for society. However, there has been limited research on friendship social capital in general, and on young people’s friendship social capital in particular. The researchers are interested in whether having high levels of friendship social capital (FRSC) leads young people to join voluntary organizations. Based on our review of the literature, the researchers expect that in dense friendship networks, young people would be likely to join voluntary organizations if friends were members. The researchers also expect that young people with very high levels of FRSC would be more likely to be active group members, as participating in group activities would strengthen their friendship networks. The researchers are also interested in the relationship between high levels of FRSC and generalized social capital (GSC). In other words, does having highly trusting relationships with friends make young people more likely to trust generalized others. The researchers investigate these issues by testing the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Young people who report that their close friends are all mutual friends have higher FRSC, compared with their counterparts who report that fewer of their close friends are friends with each other, and with those who report that none of their close friends are friends with each other.

Hypothesis 2: Young people who report a very high level of FRSC are more likely to be members of organized groups than are young people who report only a high level of FRSC.

Hypothesis 3: Young people who report a very high level of FRSC are more likely to be active members of organized groups than are young people who report only a high level of FRSC.

Hypothesis 4: Young people who report a very high level of FRSC have significantly higher means of generalized social capital (GSC) than do young people who report only a high level of FRSC.

METHODS
An online survey was conducted in this quantitative study using convenience sampling and snowballing technique. Two hundred and eighty three young people (N=283: 86 male, 194 female) aged 16 to 25 (mean age of 21.19) completed the survey between January 2006 and May 2006. Most participants (N=206) were university students who resided in Victoria. Most respondents (N=232, 82%) claimed that they only speak English at home, but only 65.7% reported that their ancestors were from English speaking countries.

Measuring Social Capital among Friends
To measure social capital among friends, the researchers first asked young people to consider all of their friends who they feel at ease with, can talk to about private matters, or call on for help. These friends are people who are not spouses, romantic partners or immediate members of the young people’s families.
In order to test Hypothesis 1, the existence of multistranded connections between members in the close friendship groups of respondents was investigated, by asking the following question: ‘To what extent do your close friends know one another?’ on an 11-point scale, (1 = No, not at all, 11 = Yes, completely). Three categories of the extent to which the close friends of respondents know one another were studied: ‘a few close friends know one another’, ‘some close friends know one another’, ‘all close friends know one another’. Young people who reported a maximum score (11 points on the 11 point scale) were categorized in ‘all close friends know one another’. Those whose score were between one and 5.99 were categorized as ‘a few close friends know one another’. Next, those whose combined score was between 6.00 and 10.99 were categorized as ‘some close friends know one another’. In order to compare FRSC mean scores of these three groups of young people, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. FRSC is treated as continuous data.

Measuring Type of Membership
To test Hypotheses 2 and 3, respondents were asked about their membership in organized groups. In the organized groups section of the survey, the first question given to the respondent was: ‘B2. Now we would like to ask you about organized groups organized by school/college/university/workplace, community, online community, national or international organizations. Are you a member of any organized group?’ Then, organized group members (OGM) were asked to report their type of membership (member, active member or office-holder). The meaning of being a non-member (NOGM), active member (AOGM) or office-holder was explained earlier as: a) a non-member does not belong to any organized group; b) a passive member pays a subscription, makes donations or is on a mailing list, but he or she is not any more involved than this; c) an active member is regularly involved in the group’s activities; d) an officeholder has a decision-making role in the group, for example, being a committee member, activity organizer or webmaster.

Due to the small number of officeholders in this sample (n = 25), the category of ‘officeholders’ was collapsed into ‘active members’. First the comparison of the levels of FSC between non-members and members was done followed by the comparison of two types of group membership: passive member; and active member. Non-members were those who did not belong to any organized groups. Those participants who claimed that they belonged to one or more organized groups as a member only (not active or office-holder) were labeled passive members. A respondent who participated as an active member in any group was categorized as an active member. For example, Ann participated in a religious group as a passive member; at the same time she was also an active member of an ethnic group. She was categorized as ‘active member’.

Measuring Generalized Social Capital
To obtain the combined scores of generalized social capital (GSC), young respondents were asked to answer three questions regarding GSC about most people whom they might meet in an average day (‘including people whom you know and strangers’): ‘To what extent do you trust him or her to act in your best interests?’, ‘To what extent do you think he or she would be willing to help if you needed it (e.g. giving directions or returning a dropped bag)?’ and ‘To what extent would you yourself be willing to help if he or she needed it? (e.g. giving directions or returning a dropped bag)’. These questions are adapted from Stone and Hughes (2002). All three generalized social capital questions were on an 11-point scale from 1 = ‘No, not at all’ to 11 = ‘Yes, completely’. Reliability analysis shows that this scale has good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient score of 0.79. This result supported Stone and Hughes’s study.
(2002) that the social capital scale has good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient reported of 0.78. To test Hypothesis 4, comparison of GSC mean scores between young people who reported very high levels of FSC and high levels of FSC was drawn using the continuous data of combined GSC scores.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis in this paper was that young people who reported that their close friends were all mutual friends would have higher FRSC than their counterparts who reported that either some of their close friends were friends with each other or a few or none of their close friends were friends with each other. A one-way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of having mutual close friends on FRSC. Subjects were divided into three groups according to the extent of how many of their close friends know each other [Group 1: a few (n = 28); Group 2 (n = 182): some; Group 3: all (n = 30)]. There was a significant difference at the p < 0.001 level in FRSC for the three groups of young people \[F(2, 245) = 10.63, p < 0.001\]. Next, a post-hoc comparison using Tukey HSD test indicated the mean score for Group 3 (M = 10.59, SD = 0.73) was different from Group 1 (M = 9.17, SD = 1.78) and Group 2 (M = 9.58, SD = 1.25).

This result revealed that young people with the highest levels of FRSC were those whose friends all knew each other, followed by lower FRSC for young people where some of their close friends knew each other, and even lower for young people who had a few or no mutual friends in their close friendship networks. This suggests that high FRSC may be much easier to build in intense and multistranded networks than in loose and unrelated networks. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

The second and third hypotheses were about FRSC and membership of organized groups. First the researchers studied whether young people who reported very high levels of FRSC were more likely to be OGMs than were young people who reported high FRSC. All respondents reported high FRSC as the definition of a friend was someone who you trusted. The key difference was between those who reported high FRSC and those who reported very high FRSC. Table 1 shows that a larger percentage of young people who reported very high levels of FRSC (62%) were OGMs than young people who reported high FRSC (44%). A chi-square test was run to confirm the different proportion of each type of membership in high levels of FRSC and very high levels of FRSC categories. The results showed that chi-square value was 8.8, p < 0.001. This indicates that the young people’s motivation to participate in organized groups was associated with the experience of sharing very high levels of social capital with their friends. Young people who reported very high levels of FRSC were less likely to be NOGMs than young people who reported high FRSC. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported: young people who had a very high level of FRSC were more likely to be OGMs than were young people who had only a high level of FRSC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of membership</th>
<th>FRSC (per cent)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOGM</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OGM</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total N</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
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Note: Missing data (n = 8) not included in subtotals

To test Hypothesis 3, young people who reported very high levels of FRSC and those with high FRSC in terms of how active their membership in organized groups were compared. As shown in Table 2, a larger percentage of young people who reported very high levels of FRSC (83%) were AOGMs than were young people who reported high FRSC (74%). However, a chi-square test showed that the differences were
not associated at a significant level, where chi-square value was 1.68, p > 0.05. It appears that the level of activity in organized groups was not strongly associated with FRSC. Young people may be equally likely to be AOGMs regardless of their levels of FRSC. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was not supported: young people with a very high level of FRSC were not more likely to be AOGMs than young people who had only a high level of FRSC.

**TABLE 2**

| Type of membership of organized groups by FRSC, group members only (per cent) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Type of membership | High | Very high | Total |
| POGM | 26 | 17 | 20 |
| AOGM | 74 | 83 | 80 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Total N | 54 | 94 | 148 |

Note: Missing data (n = 7) not included in subtotals

The fourth hypothesis was that young people who reported a very high level of FRSC would have significantly higher means of generalized social capital (GSC) than young people who reported only a high level of FRSC. The results of an independent-sample t-test revealed a significant difference was found between young people who reported high levels of FRSC (M = 6.62, SD = 1.78) and young people who reported very high levels of FRSC [M = 6.10, SD = 1.68; t(273) = -2.43, p < .05]. This result revealed that FRSC has a significant association with GSC: high GSC was associated with very high levels of FRSC. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

This study had three main findings. The findings are summarized in **Fig. 1**. First, the researchers found that very high levels of FRSC were more likely to be found in closed networks where the close friends of the young people knew one another. This indicates that densely knit closed networks foster the formation of FRSC, a form of bonding social capital. Previous research (Coleman, 1988) suggested that closed networks fostered bonding social capital, but this has not previously been explored in young adult friendship groups.

The second main finding was that young people with very high levels of FRSC were more likely to be active members of organized groups than those with lower levels of FRSC. Because the findings did not indicate causal direction, this model only suggested variables mentioned below were related. This either implies that relatively high levels of FRSC might act as a firm basis for young people to interact with other members in organized groups in formal settings, or that participation in organized groups increases social capital in one’s friendship networks. Leonard and Onyx (2004) say that community organizations enable people to become active

![Fig. 1: A very high level of FRSC is associated with closed networks and is associated with active membership of organized groups and it has significant impacts on GSC](image-url)
citizens within civil society, so if very high levels of FRSC do lead young people to join organized groups, promoting strong friendship ties could be good for society.

Lastly, levels of FRSC had a significant impact on GSC as young people with very high levels of FRSC reported higher GSC than their counterparts who reported high levels of FRSC. Indeed, tightly knit groups of friends seemed to be outgoing contributors to society in general.

The findings suggested that young people’s FRSC was highest when their close friends were from the same social network. The young people maintained their social capital with close friends in close-knit networks with multistranded and intense social connections. This description of close friendship fits the concept of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) and also lends support to Coleman’s (1988) argument that social capital can be built easily in closed networks because the norms of trust can be more effective in the closed networks than open ones.

FRSC was also related to membership in organized groups. In particular, having very high levels of FRSC may have motivated the young people to be OGMs as opposed to NOGMs. This lends support to Putnam’s (2000) argument that interpersonal trust is related to civic engagement. The experience of having FRSC with close friends may encourage young people to meet more people by joining organized groups. It seems that FRSC may act as a springboard for young people to propel themselves into the wider society and become active members of organized groups. In other words, FRSC may act as a platform for young people to reach out to the community and engage in organized group activities. The findings suggested that building very high levels of social capital with friends might act as a bridge between young people and society. On the other hand, having FRSC only at a high level is more likely to produce NOGMs. Those with lower levels of FRSC appeared less motivated to participate in organized groups. To conclude here, having very high trust and reciprocity with close friends may play an important role in young people’s participation in organized groups.

Interestingly, young people with very high FRSC were not significantly more likely to be AOGMs than were those with only high FRSC. So while FRSC was associated with membership of organized groups, it had no significant impact on how active the memberships were. Young people might be influenced by their close friends either to just sign up with organized groups or to be very active in those groups. Indeed, POGMs and AOGMs reported similar chances to build social capital with their friends.

Young people’s trust in and reciprocity with people in general was also associated with levels of FRSC. This implies that generalized social capital may be an extension of FRSC. Through practicing norms of trust and reciprocity with their close friends, young people may be able to extend their trust in and reciprocity with people in general, lending support to Putnam’s (2000) suggestion that personal networks allow trust to be extended to people in general. Thus, building and maintaining social capital among friends may lead to the generalized social capital which is essential to encourage members in the wider society to cooperate with one another. These findings do not support Fukuyama’s (1995) theory that closed networks could produce high social capital which discourage members of the informal networks from widening their formal networks and in turn also prevent them in generating trust in people in general in the broader society. Indeed, the findings show that closed networks of friends may encourage young people to build very high social capital with friends and in turn promote membership of organized groups and higher generalized social capital.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper aimed to study bonding social capital among friends. The findings showed that the young people in the sample tended to report very high social capital with their friends when there was closure in their friendship networks. This group of young people was more likely to report high generalized social capital than those with lower levels. This suggested that young people
who have made close connections with friends, people outside of their kinship group, were also more likely to trust in generalized others. In addition, those with very high social capital within friendship groups were more likely to be members of organized groups. Organized group membership appeared to have positive effects on society as it seemed to promote generalized social capital and civic engagement.

The results of this analysis suggested that promoting the dense friendship networks of young people could benefit society by fostering participation in voluntary activities and generalized social capital. Future research should further investigate the quality of the friendship networks and other potential effects of friendship social capital.

REFERENCES


