Reviewer's report

Title: Does neighbourhood social capital make a difference for levelling the social gradient in the health and well-being of children and adolescents? A literature review.

Version: 1 Date: 16 July 2012

Reviewer: Sigrid M. Mohnen

Reviewer's report:

Strengths of the paper:
- important research question
- well written, pleasant to read
- well designed analyses; no major problems with methods.
A meta analysis was not possible indeed.
- careful interpretation of results
- clear conclusion (at page 26)

Major Compulsory Revisions:

1a. Why is it important to especially study children’s health outcomes. Can we learn not enough of adult studies?

1b Why do you expect a difference between studies of North-America and Europe?

To my knowledge, some evidence on adults’ health with similar questions like this review has, were done in North America, Europe and even Asia. What can you learn from these outcomes? If North American studies differ from European studies in adult studies, you may have a case that this would also play a role in children’s health research. If not, you should argument why you expect differences in the effect of the small-area context on children’s health between countries while using a theoretical foundation.

2 I liked reading page 12, starting with “Childhood experiences are known to con…”, very much. Are you sure, you want to present this part of the text at page 12? Shouldn’t it be placed earlier? I do not say it has to change, please, just give it a thought.

3 Page 8, paragraph starting with “The socio-economic..”

You wrote: “One of the factors that might explain the consistent relation between neighbourhood socio-economic factors and health outcomes are social processes at the neighbourhood level such as levels of trust, social norms and collective efficacy.” This comes out of the blue! I had a big: HOW question here. The same with page 13, at the beginning. Your article will certainly improve if you are more clear of WHY you use neighbourhood social capital as mediator effect
and to do so you have to clarify how this works (mechanism).

4 I like to challenge the methods of this article: Please, describe why the following two publications were not part of your analysis:


I'm not saying that you have to include these studies. It’s only a test if the systematic of the review method design worked. Were these two publications part of the 792 articles? If not, why? If yes, when and why were these dropped out?

Minor Essential Revisions:

5 I got the impression that the reviewed articles had a lot of methodological weaknesses after reading Table 3. Please, explain why you concluded at page 18 that the study quality was mostly good or very good.

6 Page 9. You list Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam, however, you do not explain what the viewpoints of these researchers on social capital are. You just say that they have diverse. If you describe in short the different viewpoints, the reader will naturally understand that these viewpoints are different. Improve the article by giving more information here.

7 Explain why your paper focuses on collective characteristics (page 10)

8 To reduce the article, shorten the description of the negative side of social capital at page 11. If I’m not wrong, it plays no role in the discussion section; thus why do you make such a big fuss out of it at page 10?

9 Page 20, subtitle: used analyses. Please, add after “Five studies” the references to the studies you referring to. If you use the numbers of the reference list, it will be very space efficient and in my opinion useful. This comment applies to other parts of the results section as well.

10 Are the first three sentences of the summary of results important? I would like to read here the results on a higher aggregated level.

11 Page 24, after sentence “However, further research is needed to confirm this statement” add something like: Younger children might depend more on the neighbourhood because they are too young to leave the neighbourhood for leisure time activities. Thus, they are likely to be more exposed than others.

12 Page 27, in my opinion a too long description of the Chicago research line and I’m not sure if this is the best way to raise the question of differences between North-American and European studies. It is more likely that the measurements, used in Chicago, are not suitable to measure contextual social capital – independent of the country. I do not think that the Chicago research line is very useful in the discussion of the measurement of contextual social capital in health research. You have not convinced me, that the country plays a role in
studying small-area contextual social capital. I also wonder, what is the role of Putnam, Coleman, Bourdieu in this discussion?

13 Abstract, result section: do not only report the results of four studies which confirmed the hypothesis; also mention the other four studies.

Figures:
- well done.
- improvement possibility: Figure 2: be more clear of the reason of exclusion

Tables
- all three are necessary
- Table 1, well done. Minor question for clarification:
  You mentioned you have used different languages for the search of articles. Table 1 only shows keywords in English language. Did you also use keywords in the other languages? If so, which one?
- Table 2, also well done, however, there is a mismatch between the title of the table and the content of the table. In my opinion is the word “result” too strong. You only describe what was tested. I have to admit, you mention whether the association was significant or not, however, you do not report the direction of the association. The reader cannot conclude anything. You can fix this with a) delete the two words “and results” in the title of the table. Or b) Improve the last two columns. Maybe add a new column with conclusions of this review?
- Table 3, well done. Please, make sure all abbreviations mentioned in the table are explained in the caption of the table.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests