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.

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Reviewer: Michela Lenzi

Reviewer's report:

The study aims to review the published quantitative literature evaluating the role (mediating and moderating effects) of social capital in the association between socioeconomic status (SES) and health-related outcomes in children and adolescents. The aim is very ambitious and represents a critical advance in the study of “neighborhood effects”; indeed, despite the increasing evidence supporting an association between neighborhood structural and social characteristics and adolescents' development, the pathways through which specific neighborhood features can impact certain aspects of adolescent well-being are not well understood yet. The authors based their review on two of the main assumptions shared in the literature of neighborhood effects: the mediating and moderating role of neighborhood social capital. Moreover, the review has the strength to consider the potential “promotive” effect of neighborhood features (besides the risk and protective effects) by including positive outcomes (self-esteem and satisfaction), an aspect that needs to be evaluated in greater depth in the literature.

In general, the paper is well-written and provides important advances for the literature on neighborhood social capital. However, some issues should be addressed in order to improve the quality and comprehension of the manuscript.

Reviewer's comments

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

BACKGROUND

1. Socio-economic factors at family and neighborhood level and their impact on the health and well-being of children and adolescents, first paragraph: this theoretical paragraph could strongly benefit from the addition of a brief explanation of Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn’s models (institutional resources model, norms and collective efficacy model and relationships and ties model; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Leventhal et al., 2009), which represent the stronger theoretical basis available in neighborhood research (and also one of the fundamental basis of your review). Since in their description of the main findings in the literature the authors already name and describe some of the main assumptions of these theoretical models, a brief description would make your introduction stronger from a theoretical point of view. Here some suggestions:
“According to the institutional resources model, in neighbourhoods with high levels of structural disadvantage (low SES, high ethnic diversity, high residential instability), the quantity and variety of resources for youth is lower, thus restricting the opportunities to access several types of services and activities; thus, the neighbourhood structural features transmit their influence on adolescent development by negatively impacting the resources of the local community. The norms and collective efficacy framework posits that the levels of collective efficacy within a local community are a function of the neighbourhood structural characteristics. Therefore, neighbourhood structural disadvantage is thought to negatively influence the ability of community members to create a shared set of socially accepted norms that promotes the willingness to intervene on behalf of the community (this, in turn, has a negative effect on children and adolescent development). Finally, according to the relationships and ties model, neighbourhood structural disadvantage may operate through its negative effects on parents’ well-being, marital relationships and parental competencies; all these aspects of the family context, in fact, negatively impact adolescents’ development”.

2. Social capital: the concept explored, last paragraph: in pointing out the importance of neighborhood context for children and adolescents, the authors should refer to the specific characteristics of this developmental stages. For instance, it would be useful to refer to the limited autonomy of children, and to the increasing exploration of neighborhood settings and social interactions with neighbors occurring in adolescence (when, however, their range of actions is still limited, thus making the neighbourhood a critical context in adolescent lives).

3. Social capital and health, last paragraph: although the literature on the possible negative effects of social capital has to be included in the introduction, the presentation of findings supporting this negative effects should be shorter, respect to findings supporting a positive effect on health (since empirical research on the “dark side” of social capital is still scarce). The last three lines, in particular, refer to processes not specifically connected with the dark side of neighborhood social capital (the negative influence of peers on risk behaviors, which usually derive from low levels of social capital in the neighborhood), and should be removed.

DISCUSSION

4. Summary of results, first paragraph: in synthesizing and discussing the results of the reviewed studies, the authors should specify what kind of mediation and moderation effects have been found. The paragraph “Two studies found that the relationship between neighbourhood SES and health in children aged 5-10 years was dependent of the level of social capital in the neighbourhood. A sixth study suggested that social capital mitigates the effect of neighbourhood socioeconomic status on self-esteem in rural adolescents” would benefit from a better clarification of the specific neighborhood influences in the association between SES and children and adolescents’ well-being. Moreover, regarding the mediation effects, the two studies that found a significant effect are in line with the norms and collective efficacy and the relationships and ties models; this
should be stated, in order to provide a more complete theoretical interpretation of results.

CONCLUSIONS

5. last paragraph: although no intervention studies were included in the review, the conclusions would benefit from a description of the implications that a better understanding of the “neighborhood effects” may have on the planning and implementation of prevention and promotion programs (e.g., the choice of specific interventions based on neighborhood SES or other structural characteristics; development of tailored interventions for families with different SES...).

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS

ABSTRACT

6. Methods section: the aims should be stated more precisely in relation to the levels of analysis of the constructs under investigation. The study investigated “neighborhood social capital” and “neighborhood and family SES”; this could make it easier to understand the exact focus of the review from the beginning.

BACKGROUND

7. Health inequality and the social gradient in health, last paragraph: “the introduction will explore the role of NEIGHBORHOOD social capital”. By adding “neighborhood” the reader knows what to expect from the review.

8. Social capital: the concept explored, first paragraph: “This lack in consistency regarding the use of social capital is reflected in the lack of clarity on how to measure the concept [57]”. The authors should add “and in the variety of constructs and labels used to operationalize social relationships in the neighborhood (e.g., social support, social resources, social cohesion, informal social control)”, since they refer to these constructs in their choice of search terms.

OBJECTIVES

9. first paragraph, from “Childhood experiences are known to contribute to health inequalities in adulthood” to “A large part of the evidence that explores health inequalities focuses on adults and/or investigates the inequity between extensive geographical areas (i.e. countries or states)”; this part should be located in a new paragraph.

DISCUSSION

10. Strengths of the study: the authors should add that they consider the potential “promotive” effect of neighborhood features (besides the risk and protective effect), by including positive outcomes of well-being (self-esteem and satisfaction) in their search, an aspect that needs to be evaluated in greater depth in the literature.

11. although the review explicitly refers to published work, a reference to a possible “publication bias” (and the consequences for the interpretation of the
studies included in the review) is needed.

MINOR ISSUES NOT FOR PUBLICATION

12. Although the paper is very well-written, a lower use of short sentences would make the text more fluid.

13. Social capital: the concept explored, first paragraph: “Earlier, researchers mainly focused…” - remove the comma.

14. Social capital and health, second paragraph: “the beneficial influence of social capital’,” - remove the apostrophe.

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 only have non-financial competing interests in relation to this paper, because I'm part of the "Health Behaviours in School-aged Children" network, as well as some of the authors of the paper. However, this has not influenced the objectivity of my revisions.