Reviewer’s report

Title: The association between social capital and mental health and behavioural problems in children and adolescents: An integrative review

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Reviewer: Margaret Kern

Reviewer’s report:

This is an integrative narrative review on the role and impact that family and community social capital have on mental health and behavioral problems in children and adolescents. Overall, the work is quite extensive, bringing together 55 different studies using a broad array of variables indicating some form of social capital and various outcomes, generally grouped as self-esteem, internationalizing behavior, and externalizing behaviors. Potentially, this will be a great resource for both researchers and policy makers concerned about helping our youth avoid negative problems.

There are a few larger issues that should be addressed (major revisions), and then I’ve provided a series of comments and suggestions for improving the clarity and impact of the paper as a whole.

Major compulsory revisions:

This review is part of a larger review. Why is it only part? What is done in the larger review, and is it already published elsewhere? The purpose of the larger review, and how this piece differs, and why this is necessary need to be explicitly stated up front.

The paper claims to be a comprehensive review of social capital and mental health/behavioral problem in youth. In some ways, by having a large number of predictors and outcomes, this indeed appears quite comprehensive. At the same time, it has a feeling of being too much, such that it is hard to understand what the clear message of the review really is. In a sense, this could be a meta-analysis, looking at social capital (defined in different ways) predicting mental health, then looking at type of social capital component and type of mental health (e.g., self-worth, externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors) as moderators (as well as looking at age, self or other report, and quality of study as moderators of overall relationships). (Mental health as an outcome is essentially defined as self-esteem, which is very different from internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and is not well-being.) It seems like a very different outcome, and not clear why it is included with the others. As it stands, although in some ways a lot of information is reviewed, I am left with the feeling of being completely unsure of what was actually reviewed or discovered. A strength of the paper, as noted by the authors, is to extend work on social capital and mental health/behavior to youth, which is indeed important. I’m just afraid that in trying to be comprehensive, the review comes across as unfocused.
Minor Essential Revisions:

• The entire review focuses on social capital, but this is never explicitly defined. P. 6 notes three theorists with different conceptions of social capital. It would be helpful to briefly state (perhaps in parentheses) each one’s perspective, for the reader who might not be aware of these different theories. And in turn, directly define how social capital is being defined for the purposes of this paper. Relatedly, social capital is then broken into two concepts that are used as the framework for the review: family social capital (FSC) and community social capital (CSC). Until the coding is introduced in the method section, it is unclear what these are.

• Intro needs a definition of mental health being used here, as there are a lot of definitions. Self-esteem and self-worth arguably are not the same as mental health.

• Additional file 1 is helpful for getting a better sense of the searches done. Was this the same across databases, or were other modifications made? The file should note modifications made for the other search engines.

• For coder agreement, indicate what percentage agreement there was (For both inclusion and quality).

• Throughout the discussion, it would be helpful to integrate some discussion of the implications. Essentially results are represented, combined in different ways (across outcomes, rather than broken down by outcomes). How does this fit into the broader literature, and what are the implications?

• P 33 notes that future studies need to operationalize social capital in a more consistent and robust manner, but it’s still not clear the exact operationalization used here. What would you recommend that consistent operationalization to be?

• The final conclusion notes that the findings highlight the need for a robust framework relating social capital and health and wellbeing, but none of this is about health and wellbeing – it’s about self-esteem and internalizing/externalizing behaviors.

Discretionary Revisions:

Abstract

• The abstract notes that the findings illuminate gaps in knowledge, and yet this is not explicitly discussed in the discussion section. Throughout the discussion, it would be helpful to add the implications of findings for researchers, the youth themselves, and policy.

• Conclusion is rather vague, noting social capital can influence mental health – in what way?

• Keywords include wellbeing, but this paper is not about wellbeing (it’s about negative things, except self-esteem, which is not the same as well-being).

Background

• The background starts off talking about well-being, but the paper is about
mental ill-health, and thus the beginning is rather deceptive about the focus and purpose of the paper as a whole.

• 1st paragraph – almost all citations come from WHO – there is plenty of other literature on this that could be cited.

• P 8 criticized Ferguson’s review for having a very broad definition of wellbeing, making it hard to enable conclusions to be drawn, and yet this paper does the same thing, with broad definitions of both social capital and mental health/behavior.

Methods

• P. 9 – what mean by an integrative approach? Define, don’t simply give a citation, as integrative can mean several different things.

• Why not include unpublished studies? There can be a major file drawer problem. It’s ok to do this, but need justification for this decision.

• P. 10 notes that a pluralistic approach was used for social capital, but draws on Ferguson’s findings as a framework. What is meant by a pluralistic approach, and what Ferguson’s findings were needs to be summarized.

• In terms of community social capital, peer support seems quiet different than aspects such as civic engagement and attendance at religious services. Community thus needs to be defined (going back to the problem of not defining the main concepts being used).

• The inclusion for outcomes is rather broad. What was excluded?

• The entire search process does appear thorough, though it is somewhat hard to follow through the method section

• It appears numbers are held off until the results, but I’d like to see this upfront in the methods section – how many articles were identified through the search, how many excluded where. For example, the data analysis notes that numbers were too low for meta-analysis, and yet from the search strategy, there could seemingly be thousands of studies. (This may just be a stylist preference, and leaving in the result section is fine).

Results

• Does include the recommended figure with the reporting of search and screening, which is good.

• It’s not clear until the figure that this sub study focuses on risk behavior articles.

• Table 1 is really interesting and well-done. Instead of ordering alphabetically within each outcome, consider grouping by quality (then alphabetical).

• Table 1 needs to have a note defining FSC, CSC, and what the beta symbol means.

• The second Table 1 should probably be Table 2?

• Consider flipping Table 2 (so the categories are horizontal)

  o Also, consider including a few more associations: age group, also number of studies with self versus other reporting the data, and quality of study.
• In some cases, there is not enough studies to do a full meta-analysis, but it seems like some sort of effect sizes could be commuted. That being said, if effect sizes can’t be clearly determined, then the literary review including more studies is good.

• For range of sample size, it would make sense to go from smallest to largest (as range is typically minimum to maximum)

• I recognize that Table 1 already takes up a lot of space, but as for the numbers reported on page 17, it might be helpful to summarize the demographics across the studies in a table. It’s hard to keep track of what was categorized, and how this really breaks down across the 55 studies.

• Last paragraph on P. 18, in describing the results, the writing falls apart a bit, with sentences not making as much sense.

• P. 19 – protestant should be capitalized.

• It still seems that when there are so many studies within the broader domains, some degree of quantitative combination can be done.

• I particularly like the summaries at the end of each section in the results – this is helpful for following the main findings.

Discussion

• Mental health is essential measured as self-esteem. Really, the review is focused on self-esteem and internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Call it what it is.

• P. 30 notes that half the studies failed to find a significant relationship, and yet so many positive results are reported throughout the study. This makes me concern then what the prior results are saying. With all qualitative review, it’s hard to determine what are actual findings and what are simply the authors’ readings of things.

• In the discussion, it would be helpful to start again with what FSC and CSC is, and then fit the findings into these models. Also, several frameworks were mentioned in the intro and method, but then it’s not clear how they are used or map onto everything. Bring these pieces together.

• The discussion reports some results as positive, others as non-significant. Are the non-significant relationships the function of lack of association, or not enough studies? What are the implications of this (perhaps these are areas researchers need to focus on more, or should they ignore it)?

• P 32 notes that religiosity was not associated with outcomes, but a lot of other research (perhaps all in adults?) has found very different results. It would be helpful to comment on the differences – perhaps these are different outcomes or a different age group (or again, not enough studies have looked at it).

• P 34 notes that the large body of evidence demonstrates conclusive evidence, and yet as a literary review alone, we as readers are forced to believe the authors’ claim, without strong evidence. Soften your language to note that you have supported this, and future work should quantitatively support this.
• One other limitation to discuss is what are the implications that most research is cross-sectional? How does sample size affect things (one study had 28 people, all the way to a very large study)?

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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