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Social Capital and Transitions to Adulthood in Thailand: Empirical Investigation across Multiple Realms of Life

Rural to urban migration, rapid urbanization, globalization of technology and cultures, and the well-being of the largest generation of young people to date are urgent policy concerns that have been rarely integrated or analyzed jointly in research or policy circles. New research on the role of social capital in influencing adolescent lives and their transitions to adulthood suggests that it is a critical intervening element in explaining outcomes. However, debates about the multifaceted nature of social capital challenge the limited research that has been done to analyze its effects upon adolescent lives. In this paper, we identify several aspects of social capital including: peer networks, intergenerational ties, and community social resources as the critical intervening elements that affect adolescent transitions to adulthood in the Thai context. We are particularly interested in analyzing how these factors influence youth transitions across a five realms of life including: health and sexual activity; education; work; leisure; and family.

The stakes are high for Thailand and many other countries to meet the challenges of rapid economic and social change, the pressures of globalization, the scourge of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, while at the same time creating opportunities for and meeting the needs of youth. In the past decade, Thailand has experienced high rates of economic growth, a downturn, and a recovery. The consequences of such rapid swings in the economy have left communities and families throughout the country in turmoil. In addition, rapid fertility declines and the HIV/AIDS pandemic have coincided with enormous social and political change and increasing visibility of adolescent needs. Young adults compose the largest age group in most countries. They represent a hopeful future and yet face many current risks. Presently, there is growing concern about adolescents' future health and economic well-being because of their potential contributing towards economic and social sustainability.

For our study of youth in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, we collected data from individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 years old, their parents, and leaders in four communities. Our data include the transcripts and worksheets from 72 focus group interviews. We were interested in learning about perspectives about the lives of children (under 15 years old), adolescents (15 to19 years old), and young adults (20 to 24 years old). Focus group discussions were organized around five realms of life: education, health, work, leisure, and the household economy. The sampling approach allowed us to consider perspectives from multiple points of view, offering opportunities to uncover points of disjuncture in Thai life. We are especially interested in exploring the value of social capital and social networks as key ingredients in adolescent transitions to adulthood. Our analytic approach was to employ NVivo (a qualitative software package) to code and interrogate our date via two- through four-way cross tabulations. This allowed us to pursue a systematic approach to the data without losing sight of the deeper, qualitative insights of the material.

We used two participatory research tools to extract information about adolescent lives and perceptions about their lives: lifelines and mobility maps. The lifeline tool elicited information about youth transitions to adulthood; the mobility map tool elicited information about youth movement for activities in all five realms of life. We were able to generate information about two types of social capital and their importance in the lives of adolescents. Information about social relationships—either through work, schools, friends, or family—yielded important insights about social networks and their content. Information about community, governmental, or non-governmental groups and activities generated insights about social capital from a communitarian perspective.[1]

Because of our multiplex approach toward understanding adolescent transitions to adulthood, we observed that critical transition points are not uniform across each realm, and some points of transition in some realms of life have critical repercussions for other realms of life. Among the social forces wielding influence in youth lives are their peer networks, families, and images of modernity conveyed through media and the market. Although community organizations, either non-governmental or government-based, are identified as existent by all respondents, they are not vital institutions for adolescents, are barely recognized by adolescents, and are not linked to adolescents through their own networks. Despite their strengths as repositories and sources of financial, informational, and network resources, these local community organizations do not serve the expected function of creating social capital for Thai youth.

The gap in social capital left by the lack of youth-focused organizations in the area is filled by other sources, taking many forms in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. Peer networks emerged as the strongest form of social capital among adolescents in our study. These networks wield influence over all aspects of adolescent lives and can greatly affect adolescent transitions to adulthood. Respondents in our study, both youth and adult, described peer groups in terms of "good" or "bad." "Good" groups positively affect adolescent transitions to adulthood by encouraging education, employment, and responsibility to the family economy. "Bad" peer groups negatively affect adolescent life courses because they promote rebelliousness, disobedience, and risky behaviors, such as drug use, sexual promiscuity, and gang fights. "Bad" groups are also perceived to be responsible for teenage drop-outs since they discourage studying and encourage skipping-school.

Familial relations also strongly influence as critical elements in adolescent life courses. Strong ties exist among family members with respect to the household economy, as working Thai youth are responsible for contributing to the family income and nonworking youth depend on their parents for money. However, disconnects were present between youth and their parents in terms of personal or social relations. These disconnects were particularly pronounced concerning issues of sexual relations and drug use, but they also were present with regard to schooling decisions. Youth groups suggest that rifts between parents and youth result from youths' fears of scorn and punishment from their parents relating to these issues. Parents argue that young people do not communicate with their parents about their problems and thus parents are ignorant of their health concerns. In addition, our research reveals that parents are currently

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[1] Etzioni, Amitai (1998) *The Essential Communitarian Reader*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers; Putnam, Robert (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

struggling to determine how to effectively "parent" children in contemporary society. Parent respondents often cited difficulties of figuring out how to adjust to modern standards of youth needs, particularly with respect to money and youth consumption of material goods. Money matters further exacerbated the generational divide between parents and youth. Limited money to fund continued schooling was a severe constraint and created tensions for parents and youth. Parents had very high expectations for demonstrated youth competency before they would consider investing in youth schooling. Although expectations were high for both boys and girls, boys were more likely to receive educational investments than girls.

We find a striking lack of relevant community resources available to address youth needs and channel their desires to achieve positive life outcomes in the rapidly modernizing nation. This dearth of social capital at the community level is of particular concern for young people who are unable to stay in school, because of their parents' limited financial resources, as they miss out on critical sexual education and life skills courses available only at school. Within this group, teenage girls feature prominently as they are less likely to be able to stay in school because parents tend to invest money more often in boys' education. Last, this lack of community social capital consequently leaves adolescents with a weaker social safety net, placing them at higher risks of unhealthy life course outcomes. For girls, less social capital means early transitions to motherhood and marriage, greater risk of sexual intercourse and HIV/AIDS contraction, and higher incidence of lower quality working conditions. For young men, lower levels of all types of social capital raise the risks of violent accidents and early fatherhood.

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