

Social Capital as a Protective Resource during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Dr. Sven Stadtmüller (Corresponding author & Presenter)

Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences

Nibelungenplatz 1

60318 Frankfurt, Germany

E-mail: sven.stadtmueller@fzdw.de

Prof. Dr. Andreas Klocke

Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences

Nibelungenplatz 1

60318 Frankfurt, Germany

E-mail: andreas.klocke@fzdw.de

Abstract

Thematic importance: Children grow up in unequal conditions, and this affects their later chances for an advantageous life. Past research has confirmed children from economically underprivileged households to attain poorer educational qualifications, realize lower incomes, and have a worse (mental) health status. Since overcoming social inequalities is a desirable yet difficult goal, equipping young people with other than material resources is important to enable them to grow up well. Here, in our point of view, social capital is a highly relevant and valuable resource on which we focus in our research.

Introduction and objectives: Preliminary research suggests the COVID-19 pandemic to increase social disparities and to impair the mental health of young people. However, the latter probably does not apply to all children and adolescents in the same way. Rather, it is likely that some adolescents will cope better with the pandemic better than others. In our paper, we aim to investigate the role of social capital as a protective resource in adolescence in times of crises, using the example of the COVID-19 pandemic. We understand social capital as generalized trust that arises from the stable and trusting relationships of young people in their relevant social contexts. We expect that this generalized trust builds resilience even if the support networks are only available to a limited extent over a longer period of time like it was/is the case during the pandemic.

Method: To investigate this, we draw on data from a German panel study on injuries and health behavior carried out from 2014 to 2020 with almost 10,000 students annually surveyed from the 5th to the 10th grade (aged 11-12 to 15-16). The last regular wave in 2020 had to be stopped prematurely due to the first full lockdown in March 2020. This means that we were able to collect data on the physical and mental health of many students only several weeks or even days before schools were closed. Since we, in contrast to many other studies, have data for the situation immediately before the pandemic shut down the country, we decided to

contact the participating schools again in November 2021 to extend data collection for one survey wave covering the situation after the young people had to cope with the pandemic. Our measures of social capital and mental health prior the pandemic allow us for unbiased estimates for the impact of social capital on the (mental) health development of young people.

Expected results: We expect to survey 2,000 students in our additional panel wave which is currently in the field (till December 2021). This would allow us to test our key hypothesis, namely whether social capital worked as a protective resource during COVID-19, irrespective of the socio-economic position of the adolescents' household.

Conclusions and implications: If we find empirical support for our hypothesis, this will strengthen the role of social capital as a protective resource for young people that helps them to grow up well even in unfavorable conditions.