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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences and life aspirations of adolescents based on interview data collected from primarily first-generation high school students in three Midwestern suburban and rural towns ($N = 43$) using a social capital framework. We explore adolescents' descriptions of experiences that represent new or different careers, cultures, and life paths and how they talk about their future professional and educational aspirations. Our participants were exposed to new possible careers, cultures, and life paths from both online and offline experiences, such as study abroad, online gaming, and some uses of social media. Online networks that primarily reflected offline connections, such as Facebook, were less likely to provide these experiences.

Keywords

Adolescents, aspirations, college access, Facebook, Internet technologies, social capital

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Internet-enabled interaction has long been lauded as having the potential to open up access to ideas, information, and individuals around the world. To what extent is this true for young people who represent a possible transition generation—adolescents from primarily blue-collar families who see postsecondary education as a prerequisite for accessing higher paying careers but have limited access in their communities to college graduates representing a range of diverse careers and cultures? Are online experiences such as social network site (SNS) and online gaming activities exposing them to new ideas and worldviews, or are they serving to reinforce their offline networks and existing corpus of community intellectual capital? In this article, we employ a social capital framework to explore how adolescents in three Midwestern suburban and rural towns reflect upon experiences that represent new or different careers, cultures, and life paths and their future aspirations for their career, educational, and life trajectories, based on interview data collected from 43 adolescents. In doing so, we hope to explicate the ways in which online and offline experiences serve to disrupt or cement their understandings of the possible futures available to them and the pathways for achieving them. We believe adolescents' visions of their future are important to observe, document, and understand because these mental models of what is possible can influence their future life paths and can shape identity formation processes (Nurmi, 1991) and later life experiences (Clausen, 1991; Sirin, Diemer, Jackson, Gonsalves, & Howell, 2004).

The motivation for this study grew out of a larger research effort to investigate the role of the Internet and social media in reshaping young people's perceptions of access to resources around college going, especially for those students who may be the first in their families to go to college ("first-generation students"). For this larger project, we conducted a survey fielded at multiple schools in the area (the results of which are reported elsewhere) and interviewed junior and senior high school students at three of these schools. Although many participants gave the impression of having a fairly limited sense of the range of life paths available to them, others embodied a more diverse sense of possibilities. As we conducted more interviews over the course of the project, we noticed that some students described diverse opportunities—such as an interest in life or career pathways outside their community—and others had a more limited set of experiences to draw from. In our discussions throughout the data collection period, we kept returning to the concept of *bridging social capital*—the form of social capital associated with exposure to diverse ways of looking at the world and novel information. After deciding to write about this phenomenon, we attended more to it while coding and revisited relevant theoretical and empirical work to guide our exploration of our participants' experiences. Based on the research with college students that documents an empirical link between Facebook use and bridging social capital (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007), we were curious whether this link would be true for these teens.

Our research questions are broadly concerned with the role of social capital as it shapes our participants' understandings of their possible futures. We are particularly interested in interactions and relationships that represent different aspects of social capital, both bridging and bonding. We explore how interactions (both online and offline) with those in their network influence what adolescents see as possible life paths and how they conceptualize their desired professional and educational goals. Thus, the following research questions motivate this article:

- RQ1: What kinds of online and, offline, experiences are associated with exposure to different kinds of people, ideas, and possible life paths, as captured by the idea of bridging social capital?
- RQ2: What kinds of online and offline experiences are associated with reinforcement of more insular networks, as is often associated with bonding social capital?
- RQ3: How do interactions with their social network shape participants' understandings and expectations about their life paths, including career aspirations and college plans?

Literature review

Social capital describes the “resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive action” (Lin, 1999, p. 35). A social capital perspective can help us understand the role of different perspectives in students' social networks and how these networks can shape their life aspirations, especially for first-generation students in communities with little access to higher education.

Social capital

Social capital is an appropriate overarching framework for our study because we are interested in how having access to different people in one's social network affects adolescents' personal development. We take a *relational view* of social capital (Singh & Dika, 2003), which considers an individual's social capital based on the types of relationships that he or she has.

Many social capital scholars distinguish between two forms of social capital: bridging and bonding (Briggs, 1998; Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2002). Bridging social capital is usually associated with interactions among weak ties—people or groups who do not know each other well—while bonding social capital stems from interactions among strong ties (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000). Bridging social capital is more relevant for facilitating exposure to novel information and diverse worldviews, which may be important for adolescents living in closed networks: societies where people are strongly connected with each other but less so with people outside of the community (Coleman, 1988). Bridging social capital is often framed as access to novel or valuable information (Briggs, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

Bonding social capital is typically associated with strong ties, such as family members and close friends, and is associated with strong in-group loyalty that may lead to out-group antagonism (Putnam, 2000). In a close-knit society characterized by strong ties, community members may view people and information from outside the group as spurious or threatening to the community's values and practices. Moreover, since close ties are likely to be homogenous, members of close networks are less likely to have new information that could be valuable for finding better paying jobs located outside the community (Briggs, 1998). For adolescents living in closed communities, bonding social capital may serve to constrain their life possibilities because their network is so homophilous (Burt, 2001; Coleman, 1988).

For individuals living in tight-knit communities that have limited interaction with the rest of the world, developing bridging social capital can be especially challenging. Ethnic immigrant communities—where businesses hire only those in their own ethnic group and are collocated in a confined geographical space—are an example of an insular network (Portes, 1998). Portes (1998) examined youth in ethnic immigrant communities and found that strong bonds within the community and lack of bridging social capital to the larger society limited the ability of new generation immigrant youth to get better jobs outside the community, even if they had better English skills and more education than their parents. Likewise, Yan, Lauer, and Jhangiani (2008) found that even if the family's household income was not low, children from (ethnic) minority immigrant families benefited very little from their social ties because they were not connected to people outside of their small communities.

Similar results have been found for rural communities. Strong ties in rural areas have been found to hinder economic development, social mobility, and access to new knowledge and resources (Burt, 2001). Research has found that rural youths' aspirations are strongly correlated with their attachment to their families and communities (Hektner, 1995), making these adolescents less inclined to move outside their immediate geographic location. These dense networks may prevent individuals from being exposed to experiences that are beyond the common experiences of the local society. Research on social media use among college students has found a link between bridging social capital and use of Facebook (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). However, if one's online connections mirror one's offline network, and this network is homogenous, the ability to accrue bridging social capital via online interactions may be limited.

In sum, different kinds of social network structures—those that facilitate exposure to diverse, weak ties or those that limit interactions to more insular, homogenous strong ties—provide different kinds of benefits. In the context of young people living in non-urban communities with a population that has low rates of upward mobility and college-going, such as the ones we studied, bridging social capital may be especially important because it is a mechanism for encountering more diverse life paths.

Life aspirations

Life aspirations are an important part of adolescents' motivations, which can influence their future goals and expectations (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001). Of course, the choices made during adolescence can shape, but do not necessarily determine, the course of their lives. These choices are strongly influenced by social and individual factors, such as the type of information adolescents are exposed to as well as community norms and values (Akos, Lambie, Milson, & Gilbert, 2007; Bandura et al., 2001).

Research on adolescents' hopes and expectations of the future suggests that they are most interested in their future educational and professional roles (Nurmi, 1991). These aspirations are malleable for teenagers in that they can be influenced not only by factual information but also by the attitudes of others, such as parents, teachers, and peers (Akos et al., 2007). Adolescents' sense of possible future careers and life paths are shaped by

the kinds of people they encounter and the experiences they have; specifically, the range of possible futures adolescents perceive as possible may be influenced by the kinds of careers they encounter in their everyday lives.

For this study, we were particularly interested in first-generation students because they face unique informational challenges with regard to college going and career choice. Adolescents turn to parents, teachers, counselors, and friends for information about their future. Griffin, Hutchins, and Meece (2011) found in a national study of rural high school students that 72% talked to a parent or guardian about future plans. However, parents who did not attend college may be less able to provide college-related information to their children, because they lack informational resources about what is required for adolescents to prepare for college (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). This makes it more likely that first-generation adolescents choose, or are encouraged to choose, academic paths that limit future career opportunities, maintaining the cycle of poverty (Akos et al., 2007). From a social capital perspective, the social resources of first-generation students may be limited, because their social connections have less direct information that is useful for them with regard to successfully accessing higher education. For those in communities with few white-collar jobs, access to other kinds of career possibilities—as expressed by the concept of bridging social capital—may be especially important.

Social media and social capital

In the U.S., 65% of Internet-using adults report using SNSs (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011) and 80% of online teenagers aged 12–17 use social media (Lenhart et al., 2011), a broader term that encompasses SNSs as well as media-sharing sites like YouTube. A growing body of scholarship has explored the potential of social media to help users access social capital and has found an empirical link between perceptions of social capital and Facebook use among adult and college student populations (Burke, Kraut & Marlow, 2011; Ellison et al., 2007, 2011). However, the extent to which these patterns are true for younger age groups is unclear. Specific affordances of the site, such as the ability to interact with “Friends of Friends” through comment streams (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014) and the fact that identity information in the profile can help users find common ground (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007), may enable users to maintain larger networks of weaker ties (Donath & boyd, 2004) and to activate latent ties (Ellison et al., 2007)—both of which serve to facilitate expansion of one’s network in ways consistent with bridging social capital.

Little research has focused specifically on adolescents and the social capital implications of their social media use. Greenhow and Burton (2011) explored adolescents’ use of MySpace, the SNS dominant at the time among low-income high school students; their participants identified greater access to personal information through MySpace status updates and media-sharing opportunities (e.g., tagging people in photos) as features that helped them sustain weaker connections and build new ones. Another study found that first-generation adolescents who knew someone on Facebook who was either enrolled in or had graduated from college were more confident that they, too, would successfully attend and graduate from college (Wohn, Ellison, Khan, Fewins-Bliss, & Gray, 2013). This relationship between perceptions of future success and certain kinds of social

media use, however, was not present for high school students who had parents who were college graduates, perhaps because the ability to network beyond one's immediate connections through social media may be more beneficial for first-generation students who lack access to college-related information within their household.

The studies reviewed above suggest that social media might facilitate social capital development and contribute to adolescents' life aspirations. As adolescents, especially first-generation students living in closed communities, participate in SNSs and other online fora they may be exposed to new people, information, and ideas that expand their understanding of possible life paths. Alternatively, these tools may serve to reinforce existing networks of strong ties (associated with bonding social capital) but limit their exposure to new individuals and the possible careers, lifestyles, and futures they represent—and thus constrict the range of the future pathways they perceive to be possible.

Method

We explored adolescents' online and offline experiences and their life aspirations and worldviews based on in-depth interviews with 43 Michigan high school students who were primarily first-generation students from low-income families. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the researchers' institutional review board.

Sample

Participants in this study were 20 juniors and 23 seniors attending three high schools in an area of Michigan where the median household income is US\$40,000; 18.5% of residents live below the poverty level, and about the same portion (17%) of the population have a bachelor's degree or higher (United States Census Bureau, 2012). In our sample, most participants would be the first in their families to successfully complete college. Guidance counselors or college access coaches invited students to participate in the study and were instructed to recruit a sample that represented the makeup of the school in terms of race/ethnicity, first-generation status, college aspirations, and parental income.

All three authors and two research assistants participated in conducting a series of interviews in the fall of 2012 with a purposeful sample of 19 male and 24 female high school students. They were primarily Caucasian (76.7%), with some African American (11.6%) and mixed-race (9%) participants. One person declined to report his/her race. Twenty-five individuals (58%) reported qualifying for free or reduced lunch at school. Only three individuals reported that both parents had graduated from college. All 43 participants used Facebook, 44% used Twitter, 19% used Instagram, and 11.6% used Tumblr. Facebook (90%) was cited as the SNS used most often, followed by Twitter (3%). More than half of participants (53.5%) said that they used Facebook several times each day.

Data sources and procedures

Participants completed a questionnaire and participated in a semi-structured interview. The four-page questionnaire included questions about their grade, sex, ethnicity, parents'

educational background, and technology use. Our interview protocol included questions about participants' ideas and perceptions of their future; their postsecondary educational aspirations (if applicable); and their experiences, online and offline, of getting information about college, making social connections, engaging in self-presentation, and other activities. Semi-structured in-person interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and took place at the schools. Based on the participants' responses regarding their life aspirations and expectations about postsecondary education, we then asked a series of questions about their college-going plans such as whether or not they had a degree or major in mind. Regardless of their intention to attend college, we asked about career plans. We also asked students to tell us what others in their social network (e.g., family and friends) thought about their choices and whether and how they used the Internet and social media, in particular, to get information about college, other educational options, or career paths.

Recorded interviews were transcribed using an online transcription service (<https://scribie.com>), checked for accuracy, and imported into ATLAS.ti qualitative coding software. Participant names were replaced with pseudonyms. After reading through the transcripts, the authors created an initial list of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which reflected aspects of the interviews that were salient with respect to our larger research motivation as well as concepts from the literature. In an iterative fashion, the entire data set was coded by each of the three authors using this list of etic and emic codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

During the coding process, we frequently discussed the code list and added codes that emerged through the process. For instance, our initial list of codes included a code for 'career choice', used to capture participants' responses regarding how they choose or think about choosing a career (e.g., "I used to want to be a veterinarian, like that's what I wanted to be my whole life, and now I'm looking at like other options") and one for "college expectation" (e.g., "[In a year] I will hopefully be attending a college for Rehab Tech"). Furthermore, new codes, such as the code for bridging social capital, were added in response to excerpts in which participants discussed their exposure to new people, ideas, and worldviews and the impact of these experiences on them, all of which fell under the theme of bridging social capital. In iteratively defining and refining our code definitions, we considered cases that did not fit any of the codes but spoke to our research questions in order to further define our coding scheme. Reading through the excerpts coded as bridging social capital, for instance, allowed us to see the range and dimensions of this code as it was developing and consider the coded data in light of our reading of the social capital literature and understanding of the participants and the research context. No codes were removed during the coding process, but some codes were broken up into multiple codes when nuanced distinctions among them became apparent.

As we worked through the corpus, we created analytic memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to reflect on concepts, including questions or ideas about coded passages. We met biweekly, reflecting and making notes on the coding key as we revised the definitions of codes or created subcategories to refine the coding scheme. To group codes into higher order themes, the coded transcripts were read and then relevant quotes and ideas from multiple codes were assembled and grouped in a separate document (Creswell, 1998). For instance, excerpts in which participants discussed their desire to or resistance toward leaving the local area were initially grouped in a "leaving the area" category, but as our

analysis was refined, we realized some of these excerpts related to bonding social capital and some were associated with bridging social capital. Thus, the themes described below emerged from an iterative process of refining codes, microanalysis of the text, and identifying higher order themes across participants.

Findings

Bridging social capital experiences

Our first research question asked about the online and offline experiences that participants associated with exposure to different kinds of people, ideas, and possible life paths, as captured by the idea of bridging social capital. Many participants described experiences we would characterize as facilitating bridging social capital; these experiences came in different forms, but all enabled participants to *engage in regular social interactions with a pool of individuals from outside the local community or school*. These opportunities included civic engagement or volunteering activities; study abroad (both interacting with foreign students at one's home school and traveling abroad); and participation in online interaction fora such as Facebook groups or Internet gaming communities. Some of these experiences were triggered by events outside the control of the participants (such as encountering foreign students at school), but in other cases students sought out or placed themselves in situations where they would be more likely to be exposed to these kinds of experiences.

Groups that brought together different kinds of people played a role in facilitating exposure to diversity. Similar to the way in which Putnam (2000) described the role of civic organizations such as bowling leagues in bringing together diverse individuals, some of our participants encountered new kinds of people through civic organizations and volunteer activities. Lola, a senior, was heavily involved in a volunteer organization similar to a rotary club. She explained that exposure to different kinds of people through the group's activities and through campaigning door to door for politicians made her realize that the society beyond her community was very diverse. In her words, "It made me realize there're larger things out there than myself. It definitely opens your eyes about all the different types of people out there." This expansive sensibility is consistent with academic understandings of the kinds of outcomes associated with bridging social capital. Similarly, Aiden said going to church changed how he thought about his future, saying that church "made me meet a lot of new people and it made me see the world a lot different than [how] I used to see it."

Interactions with people from other countries, as facilitated through study abroad experiences or via "Friends of Friends" on Facebook, were another source of bridging social capital. Four of our participants—Samantha, Bob, Amber, and Nick—explicitly described interactions with foreign exchange students that they claimed changed their worldviews. They described their interactions in ways consistent with the mechanics of bridging social capital in the literature, such as helping them to gain insight about the constructed nature of beliefs that they had previously understood as universal by comparing their lives with those of people living in other cultures. For instance, Samantha, who was concerned about the cost of college, learned from a Danish foreign

exchange student that people in other countries paid higher taxes but “they go to college for free and they get free health care . . . it would be so helpful if our country was like that.”

Similarly, the school attended by Bob, a senior, hosted a number of exchange students, four of whom were from Germany. Bob later traveled to Germany, where he attended school and then traveled with these students around the country for a month. He said the experience made him “way more open-minded” and explained:

It really made me realize there’s more than just my small town. I know a lot of high schoolers, including myself, used to think of foreigners as not—I don’t know, maybe not as good as Americans or something. And then when you go over there and you actually experience it, you realize their basic goals in life are the same. It’s just they live life a little bit differently, but it doesn’t mean it’s bad. I mean, I like their way of life better than ours now.

He said the experience made him “way more open-minded.”

For other students, exposure to foreign exchange students provided an initial channel for interactions with culturally diverse peers, but instead of traveling abroad as Bob did, they kept this channel open via social media after the students returned to their home country. As Amber noted,

I get lots of experience with different cultures because I have friends from different countries that have been foreign exchange students. So they “like” things on Facebook that I don’t understand and so I get to see . . . diverse things.

Nick, a junior, even used an online translation service to translate foreign Friends’ Facebook posts:

I Friended [the foreign exchange students] on Facebook, and then I can look at their pictures and read their past stuff, [and] thanks to Google Translate I can understand it [laughter]. So, I can look through and see what they’ve done in their past, or what their cities look like, or their culture and all that kind of stuff.

Nick’s example illustrates the complex interaction of online and offline tools around bridging social capital: Although the institutional structure of his school provided the initial exposure to the exchange students, he initiated extended interactions with them through Facebook and then worked to understand content they posted, even when it was not in English.

In addition to providing a channel for sustaining connections made offline, social media also provided a way to identify and connect with new kinds of people for some participants. For instance, Lola used social media to meet new people from different parts of the world, from “the United Kingdom to Texas to Wisconsin,” and to engage in extended interactions with them; she did this through a Facebook group dedicated to a health condition she experienced. Nick also connected with a wider range of people through Xbox networked gaming. He initially played games such as *Call of Duty* with them, but then eventually formed close interpersonal relationships with a subset of

these players such that they would go online just to socialize, “like a party,” and not necessarily to play the game. These “really close friends” were older than him, lived in other states, and had different levels of secondary and postsecondary education. Nick welcomed feedback from these diverse individuals and asked them questions via the Xbox system:

I’m always looking stuff up, I’m always talking about it, I’m getting the feedback and if they think it’s a good idea or not. Usually, I go to Xbox to ask if it’s a good idea from them because *they* look at life more realistically.

In contrast, he said his school friends believed “you got to go to college after high school” because “that’s what the teachers kind of put in your brain.”

Similarly, Sophia, a senior, noted the lack of exposure to bridging experiences represented by her Facebook network. She said it was frustrating to go online and see people complaining about their lives:

Really? Your life is not that hard. Go stay in Africa, go stay in some third world country where they have nothing. I know life has probably been pretty hard but you have food on your table and have clothes on your back.

In Sophia’s case, her own exposure to different worldviews led to frustration with those who, in her opinion, hadn’t encountered a broader range of experiences and people and lacked the perspective these experiences would provide.

Bonding social capital experiences

Our second research question asked about interactions or relationships that reflected closed networks, reinforcement of more insular bonds, and a lack of exposure to diverse worldviews and experiences, as associated with bonding social capital. When asked about their “typical day,” participants described interactions with a fairly limited set of family, friends, and sports teammates around activities such as football games, church, or playing video games with friends. These individuals were present in their SNSs as well, where many of our participants felt they had little control over friending decisions, which meant that some online tools reinforced their already insular offline networks. For instance, Nick described the constrained nature of his Facebook network, where he felt “stuck in a circle,” in comparison with his online gaming community, “With Facebook it’s more just family and friends where it’s like ‘I already know all this, so I’m not really learning anything about anyone.’” In contrast, “on Xbox, you get people around the world, people in the United States, Canada, all the way in Germany and such. So you get their look on life.”

In contrast to his online gaming experiences, where he felt like he had control over who he interacted with, Nick perceived his Facebook network as more rigid, subject to peer influences over friending decisions and largely limited to the people in his immediate vicinity. In contrast, Nick described Xbox as representing a new set of people to engage with:

Because it's usually when you go into a game, you just get a set of random people, and then you talk to those people and then if you like their personality, you can add them to your friends' list and then you talk to them more, and if you don't like the way they are if you talk to them more, you can remove them . . . It's really just what you want your environment to be on Xbox versus Facebook which is everyone around you makes your environment on Facebook.

Consistent with the literature on bonding social capital, Nick's Facebook ties were less likely to expose him to diverse worldviews or novel information; in his words, on Facebook he was "not really learning anything about anyone." Nick felt like he had very limited ability to reshape his Facebook network because removing friends on Facebook would likely result in a face-to-face confrontation, as opposed to Xbox where removing someone from another state meant that "it's not like they're gonna come up to me and be like, 'You're a jerk.'" If adolescents see Facebook as a communication space bounded by normative expectations about friending, this may limit its utility as a channel for engaging with people representing new worldviews.

Other participants echoed this sense of Facebook as a place where they had little control over their friends' list when it came to schoolmates and family members, even those who didn't live in the area. For instance, Matthew, a senior, said "if I deleted family from out of state . . . they'd somehow get on with my dad and talk to him and then it's like they would ask why they were deleted." The normative pressure to indiscriminately friend schoolmates was also mentioned by Clarece who said initially she was "all against going on Facebook just because I didn't want to share with people who'd want to friend me but who don't talk to me, like here [at school]." In the cases where participants discussed encountering diverse perspectives on Facebook, they associated these perspectives with friends from contexts other than their school or shared geography, such as other members of a health-related Facebook group or study abroad students' profiles.

Interactions with social network and future aspirations

Finally, our third research question explored the ways that participants talked about the relationship between their interactions with those in their social network and their aspirations regarding future life paths, career possibilities, and pursuit of postsecondary education. Participants' understandings of their career options were intertwined with the composition of their social networks and their everyday experiences. Those participants who reported a broader, more diverse range of interaction partners as influential seemed to have a broader sense of the kinds of careers they might pursue. For instance, Bob, the student who studied abroad, intended to pursue a career in international relations, where he would have the opportunity to meet new people. He explained that before he went to Germany, he was sure he wanted a military career and even applied to a military academy, but the experience of living abroad made him rethink this because he would lose control over where he would be placed and he wanted to experience travel from a "citizen's perspective" not a "military perspective." For Bob, the experience of interacting with individuals from a different culture helped him realize the restricted nature of his former beliefs about other countries and rethink his former career and life goals.

Similarly, Deana planned to become an air flight attendant and expressed a desire to live in Korea after becoming close to an exchange student from Korea.

Participants often referenced interactions with parents or friends of the family when they described the kinds of career choices they envisioned for themselves. However, sometimes this exposure to career options was not accompanied by deep knowledge of what that particular career entailed. For instance, Aiden originally wanted to pursue a career in law enforcement, but became disenchanted with this idea because he did not want to have to fulfill the educational requirements. His current plan was to go to school for engineering because it “just sounded fun because that’s what my dad did, and he’s a supervisor in one of his shops. He gets paid pretty good.” Aiden, however, had little knowledge about what an engineering career actually entailed. Several other participants reported that they intended to pursue careers that their fathers or other family members had; the range of careers represented by these individuals appeared to shape the potential life paths participants saw as possibilities. Michael, for instance, wanted to become a mechanic like his father; Paul wanted to pursue his father’s career of installing heating and cooling systems; Jacob was considering become a pastor like his father.

Participants who did not know people in their intended professions personally appeared to lack information about those professions, echoing the way that participants without college-graduating parents lacked information about the college application process. These first-generation participants were less likely to be able to get information about college from their parents. For instance, when we asked Aiden if he got information about college from his family, he said, “Not really. They just tell me to make sure I go.” Similarly, in response to a question about whether her parents have talked to her about college, Sophia replied, “Nobody really talks to me about it. (Laughter) I really just talk to myself about it.”

Participants credited their personal experiences with helping to shape their career expectations. Maria, a female junior, was diagnosed with a health condition and this influenced her goal of becoming a physical therapist. Abby wanted to major in “sonography for babies,” because as she watched her grandfather get hospital treatment, she became interested in a medical career. Similarly, Terrence became interested in biomedical science after a football injury:

I had to go to [a local hospital] because I had a concussion two years ago from football and I just seen the hospital . . . and see what things they were doing, and I just was like, “That’s something I want to do.”

Teresa spent time with her grandmother at a nursing home and this influenced her decision to go into the medical field, perhaps with a doctorate. Social media sometimes facilitated these exchanges, as with Michelle who used Facebook to communicate with a faraway cousin about her career in massage therapy.

Participants also learned vicariously from others’ experiences. In the case of Nick, his Xbox friends had a variety of experiences with college, which they shared with him. For instance, one friend started to attend college but had to leave because of financial issues. According to Nick, he learned from these friends’ experiences and applied them to his

own life plans, noting that “their experiences with life kind of gives me more of a look on what my future has to show.” He explained:

I know one of them dropped out of high school, and so he’s going through a hard time. And I’m like, “Well, I’m going to graduate from high school, so my life will probably be a little easier.” [Another] friend went to college and dropped out and ended up with college debt, and I’m like, “Well, if I go to college, I know that I’m going to go through it no matter what, so I won’t end up with that debt, so I might turn out better than that.” It’s a good way to kind of piece everything together and try to set up a little sort of an outline on life. Though things can be changed on an outline, it’ll give me that basic “what I want to do.”

His experiences with a broader range of individuals via the gaming system provided him with a template for understanding the consequences of different decisions, such as dropping out of high school, and enabled him to construct an “outline on life.” In contrast, participants who only had access to less diverse networks, such as only family members or peers from school, would presumably not be able to access this wider range of possible life paths.

Moreover, participants’ experiences with their close network of family members made it very difficult for some to envision life paths that required education or training away from home. Some of the participants we spoke with had strong relationships with family members and mentioned leaving their family as one of the biggest challenges they anticipated regarding going to college. In many cases this was because they saw their families as sources of support or enjoyed spending time with them. For instance, Ethan identified one college-related challenge as “being away from my family because I love my parents to death. I mean, they support me in everything I do.” In at least one case, participants felt obligated to stay to help parents with health issues or other needs, as in the case of Maria who helped care for her mother who was disabled.

These pressures to stay in the local area were also experienced in relationship to friendships—in other words, sometimes strong ties and bonding social capital made it difficult for adolescents to pursue paths that diverged from those of their peers. As Teresa commented:

I have friends that will be like “I can’t believe you’re going to go away to college and leave me.” I have friends that get mad like when I say, “I’m gonna go away to college,” they’re like, “Why don’t you just go to [a local community college]? It’s closer and it’s at home.” And I’m like, “Because you don’t really get like the freshman year experience unless you go away.” . . . I’ve heard so many fun things about freshman year at college. I want to go away and experience it for myself and I have friends [that] get mad at me about it. They’re like, “Why are you leaving me?”

Thus, although participants with a less diverse group of individuals, such as only family members or peers from school, drew career inspiration from these networks, they sometimes also experienced pressure to conduct a college search process based on location rather than program fit or other career-related factors.

As with the students who connected with study abroad friends via Facebook, exposure to new kinds of people was facilitated by participants’ use of online tools. Lola said she

had “talked to new people from all over” the U.S. and U.K. via a Facebook group devoted to a particular health condition and that she discussed the possibility of going to college out of state with them. In this case, the geographic diversity of her social network may have made the idea of traveling out of state less daunting. When asked about what college would be like, she said,

I think it will definitely be a completely different scene than [my high school], out in the middle of nowhere. I mean just the groups I’ve had in [my county] is like a little culture shock of my own with everybody else. But, I guess I’ll just, I’m going to embrace it. That’s all you can really do. It’s gonna be completely different than the 50 or 60 some kids I have in my class.

Her attitude differed from participants who hadn’t had this kind of experience, such as Sam, a senior who described his reticence to leave the area for college: “I don’t know. It’s just scary because I’ve been in [my town] in my whole life. So it’s really hard to just leave, I guess.”

Discussion

Our findings document some of the bridging and bonding social capital experiences our participants described and how they talked about their future life paths, including career interests and educational futures. Given our dataset, we cannot make directional claims about the extent to which participants’ experiences and interactions directly shaped their educational and vocational aspirations. However, we did observe a pattern that future research should address using other methods: Many of our participants who found themselves in situations where they encountered diverse individuals or novel experiences described these experiences as influencing their aspirations in various ways, such as sparking a desire to travel or to live in another country, and discussed how these experiences made them rethink their perceptions of the world and a wider range of possible life paths. As one participant explained, seeing how other people lived their lives and learning from their tribulations and triumphs allowed him to create an “outline” of strategies he might use in his own life. In a sense these individuals provided the raw data that he used to analyze different paths his life might take, such as not finishing high school or postponing college. These examples are consistent with the framing of bridging social capital, which is developed through connections with people outside of one’s immediate network.

We believe social capital, or the benefits we receive from our social relationships (Putnam, 2000), may be a useful framework for understanding the link between exposure to different kinds of people and the implications of these more diverse social networks for shaping future aspirations and worldview. Social capital can help us consider how social resources (e.g., information, tangible help, and social support) are made available and how access to different kinds of people can benefit individuals. *Bridging social capital*—typically associated with weaker ties that tend to be sources of novel information, diverse worldviews, or different perspectives—may be especially important for adolescents living in lower income households in rural and suburban areas, like our

participants, because these contexts tend to have a more narrow range of careers represented, potentially constraining adolescents' visions of their educational and vocational options. *Bonding social capital* may help in providing adolescents with social support and a sense of belonging to their family or community but may also serve to constrain individuals from pursuing a life path that is different from those around him or her.

Through various online and offline activities, some of our participants had the opportunity to form personal relationships with people outside of their immediate community. We were particularly interested in the role of social media in shaping these adolescents' aspirations because social media is an important part of adolescents' everyday experience and relationship management behaviors. Adolescents' relationships with weak ties, as facilitated by the affordances of Facebook and other forms of social media, can potentially expand their bridging social capital in ways that impact their life and career aspirations. For instance, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) describe how the identity information in a Facebook profile might provide users with the impetus to pursue a nascent friendship because the "detailed profiles highlight both commonalities and differences among participants" (p. 1163).

In contrast with studies of college students and adults who have identified an empirical link between bridging social capital and Facebook use, we found that in most cases participants did not associate their Facebook networks with bridging experiences. To some extent, this is surprising given the literature and the fact that, in our sample, the majority of students reported using Facebook to connect with friends they rarely see, which could expose them to information from outside their local close networks. Moreover, in our brief survey, 40% of our sample reported using SNSs to make new friends. Nonetheless, although one participant experienced new ideas and people via a health-related Facebook "Group" and two others used Facebook to connect with Friends in other countries and view different cultures, many of our participants talked about the limiting, socially constricted nature of Facebook, a context in which they could not defriend peers without being held accountable at school the next day or felt pressures to engage in obligatory Friending with schoolmates. The relationship between social capital and Facebook use found in college and adult samples may not apply uniformly to adolescents, whose networks may rely more strongly on physical proximity than those of adults. Facebook networks often consist of relationships that have some offline connection (Ellison et al., 2007, 2011). For adults, this may not be limiting, as adults often have several location-based foci through which they encounter others (e.g., hobbies, work, alumni, neighbors, etc.). But for adolescents who spend the majority of time in highly social school environments with fewer opportunities for out-of-school connections, the offline basis for Facebook friendships may mean there are limited opportunities for adolescents to use Facebook to reshape and expand their networks in meaningful ways.

Although the normative enforcement of friending behaviors (such as not feeling free to refuse a friendship request from schoolmates) may happen occasionally in adult relationships, adult users are often not as hyperproximate as high school classmates and thus may have fewer opportunities for face-to-face confrontations around rejected connection requests. If it is the case that adolescents feel obligated to replicate their entire offline network in their Facebook friends list, the opportunities for accruing bridging social capital via use of SNSs for these teens may be limited. Future research should

explore norms and expectations around accepting SNS connection requests for both adolescent and adult populations and the implications of various friending behaviors for network composition and information access. It may be that SNSs that don't have "real-name" policies, are less enmeshed in offline networks, and do not have symmetrical friending restrictions (such as Twitter) are better able to provide adolescents with exposure to new and different kinds of people.

Because adolescent social media practices change rapidly, and norms around network composition may evolve, over time teen SNS networks may be reshaped into more diverse and less constrictive friend networks. Alternatively, technological interventions that capitalize on students' existing Facebook-related routines, including its utility for sustaining distant relationships (e.g., with study abroad connections) and meeting new people (e.g., through Facebook groups devoted to specific interests), may help students recognize the bridging potential of their Facebook activities. Teen-targeted Facebook applications, such as *Hot Dish* or *College Connect*,¹ whose features emphasize more interest- or aspiration-driven activities, may help their adolescent users perceive these networks as fluid reservoirs of people and information, rather than limiting and constricted. Future work should study technology-based interventions to determine which combination of social and technical affordances best facilitate exposure to a "larger" world for adolescents who desire it.

We found that exposure to different kinds of people and cultures helped some students recognize common ground across cultures. Exposure to different kinds of people and cultures helped students identify points of commonality and envision more geographically, academically, and occupationally varied life trajectories for themselves. For students in rural or low-income communities who experience the close-knit "ties that bind," limiting their visions for the future, such exposure to difference may be essential—especially for those adolescents who wish to pursue a life path that diverges from the ones they encounter in their local communities. Although popular news stories have speculated about the dangers surrounding adolescents who converse with strangers online, our findings suggest that, for some adolescents, certain kinds of online interactions can be both positive and meaningful in that they enable teens to benefit from the diverse perspectives and information held by those outside the immediate community.

Conclusion

Based on interviews with junior and senior high school students in rural and suburban Michigan, this study explored different kinds of online and offline experiences, the role of bridging and bonding social capital experiences, and the kinds of life possibilities envisioned by our participants. We were particularly interested in the complex and sometimes contradictory role of social media and Internet-enabled interactions. Our findings suggest that online interactions can be positive, expansive, and meaningful—but also constraining. Some of our participants learned from other people's experiences and used that knowledge to both reflect upon their own life paths and vicariously learn from others' experiences. On the other hand, some participants were restrained by pressure to have their online social network mirror their offline network, which served to reinforce the values and norms of these peers. Having exposure to "different" people—whether it be through

foreign exchange programs or online gaming—seemed to mitigate the lack of diversity that is often found in smaller, isolated communities. Experiences that expose adolescents to a diverse set of life possibilities may help adolescents like our participants as they move from formulating an “outline on life” and begin to start writing the first chapter of their adult lives.

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Note

1. College Connect (<https://collegeconnect.us>) was developed by Bernie Hogan, Christine Greenhow, and Nicole Ellison.

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