6-2-2017

Conceptualizing the Emergence of Social Capital in Young Children

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Conceptualizing the Emergence of Social Capital in Young Children

by

Courtney Wong

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Conceptualizing the Emergence of Social Capital in Young Children

by

Courtney Wong

Advisor: Roger Hart

This paper explores the concept of social capital as it relates to children. Three major theorists, Coleman (1988), Putnam (1995), and Bourdieu (1986), offer different conceptualizations of social capital, but all agree that social capital exists within relationships amongst people and allows them to facilitate an action or receive some sort of benefit. Within much of social capital literature, children are mostly viewed as passive recipients of social capital from their parents and teachers, as opposed to being acknowledged as creators of their own social capital. More recent research is starting to recognize the latter and to conceptualize how children, mostly in middle childhood and adolescence, are developing their own social capital in support of the development of community. This paper investigates how sociology research has examined social capital created by children and youth, and merges sociology and psychology research to propose how young children also develop their own social capital through intentional, complex networks of friendships that they actively form and sustain.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Social capital is a concept that has been recognized as a component of community development. It has been conceptualized differently by various theorists, but most seem to agree that it exists within the relationships that members of a community build with one another and allows them to facilitate individual or collective action. In other words, through connections with people, social capital is a helpful resource that enables people to pursue goals that may benefit themselves or the community at large. Coleman (1988), one of the foundational social capital theorists, suggests that social capital exists in three forms: norms or rules of the community, trust, and pathways for sharing information. Each of these forms of social capital can support the interactions amongst community members in ways that benefit individuals or the group as a whole.

Much of the social capital literature focuses on the social networks of relationships that adults build, supporting the functioning of community. The authors propose that social capital is created and used by adults in various settings, often to help them acquire other forms of capital, such as human capital (e.g., education) and economic capital (e.g., wealth). While adults have been in the spotlight of social capital research, children have been much less visible as active creators of this social capital. The major social capital theorists, as well as earlier social capital studies, have framed children as passive recipients of social capital from their parents and other adults in their lives. Furthermore, much of these studies measure the social capital of adult networks around the child (e.g., parent relationships with others in the school or neighborhood) in consideration of their impact on children’s development—without consideration for how children are creating social capital themselves in ways that impact their own development.
This paper seeks to understand children’s roles in contributing to their own development and community development through their active construction of social capital. Sociologists have begun to recognize and investigate adolescents’ creation of their own social capital in ways that benefit themselves, their families, schools, etc. However, they have yet to recognize this social capital development in young children. Elements of social capital development may look different in young children, just as networks of relationships amongst adolescents are different from those amongst adults. For this reason, an examination of how young children create their own social capital would profit from an interdisciplinary approach including perspectives from both sociology and psychology. Though young children’s actions and behaviors may not have been labeled or acknowledged as contributing to social capital in the literature, there has been much research in psychology and sociology on children’s social interactions with peers and friendship formation that suggests otherwise.

I will first review conceptualizations of children as active learners and social agents. I will then review three major theories of social capital by Coleman, Bourdieu, and Putnam, followed by an examination of social capital research in relation to children. This will cover the complexity of measuring children’s social capital and the types of social capital research where children have been treated as passive recipients, rather than active constructors. The final two chapters will focus on a smaller number of more recent studies of social capital created and used by children. I will review what researchers have learned about how children, in middle childhood and adolescence (age 8-18), create their own social capital through both relationships with peers and relationships with adults. I will then review the research literature, largely from psychology and sociology, on young children’s social relationships and interactions to explore how social
capital is created by young children, ages 3-5. I will rely primarily on Coleman’s conceptualization of social capital as a guide in making this analysis.

**Theorizing Children as Active Learners**

Piaget conceptualized children as active participants who develop through universal stages. He theorized that they learned how to solve problems by actively constructing their own cognitive world through the processes of assimilation (incorporating new information into pre-existing schema) and accommodation (modifying pre-existing schema in order to include new information). However, while he viewed children as active learners, he did not take social interactions and context into account for these theories of development (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2010).

Rather than focus on universal stages, Vygotsky centered on the importance of the environment (social and cultural context), including help from adults, in cognitive development. He suggested that important components of learning are: the use of language, the role of culture, and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD refers to “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 33)—in other words, the difference between what a child can do on his/her own and what s/he can do with help. Vygotsky believed that when a child is in his/her zone of proximal development, assistance from an outside source, like a parent or educator helped boost that child’s learning immensely and allowed the adult and child to co-construct learning together.
Similarly, Bronfenbrenner, who conceptualized children as active participants, added a richer conceptualization of the context. He proposed that we use an ecological framework with increasingly larger and cumulative contexts or environments of the ecological systems in which a child lives, interacts, and grows. These environments are comprised of: 1) microsystem – the most immediate environment, e.g., family, school, 2) mesosystem – interaction/system of microsystems, e.g., interaction between family and school, 3) exosystem – social settings or institutions with which child may not interact but still influence child, e.g., parent’s workplace, family friends, 4) macrosystem – cultural belief systems, and 5) chronosystem – change or consistency over time in characteristics of individual and environments, (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner (2005) referred to the ecology of human development as:

the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation throughout the life course, between one active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which this person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which these settings are embedded. (p. 107)

Thus, Bronfenbrenner viewed the importance of both the child’s active, changing development and interactions with his/her settings, as well as the changing relationships between these different settings.

Theorizing Children as Active Social Agents

While Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bronfenbrenner saw children as active in their own development, their focus was more on cognitive development of individuals within settings that they did not create or significantly influence. Bronfenbrenner came closest in taking into account children’s interactions with the environment and interactions between environments, but did not focus on children’s impact on their environments and social relationships. The conceptualization
of children as active social agents has been a more recent development in the research and development of children. It has come primarily not from psychologists, but from sociologists and anthropologists within the new interdisciplinary field of childhood studies (Corsaro, 1997; Hendrick, 1992; Prout & James, 1997).

As Prout and James (1997) note, “The history of the study of childhood in the social sciences has been marked not by an absence of interest in children…but by their silence” (p. 7). It is possible that this silence may have grown out of an initial absence, stemming from Ariès’s suggestion of initial lack of awareness of the notion of childhood in the Middle Ages, that later grew to a period of coddling or idolization as a source of amusement for adults. This later developed into a moralistic period, by the 18th century, where childhood was viewed as a time requiring training and discipline by adults (Corsaro, 1997; Hendrick, 1992). From this moralistic period on, children have mostly been silenced—being treated as unworthy of study on children themselves. Much of the earlier (as early as 14th and 15th centuries) studies on children were conducted through indirect means of court records, coroner’s rolls, literary sources and advice books on childrearing practices (Corsaro, 1997)—all sources in adult language from adult perspectives.

The sociologist Thorne (1987) emphasizes the importance of conceptual autonomy of childhood—promoting the focus on children’s roles and experiences as central to the study of childhood, as opposed to merely viewing the child as a part of or only in relation to other entities (e.g., family, school). The importance of children’s agency in the form of participation in decision-making with adults was also recognized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a progressive and aspirational document. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) supports the individual political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children to their
identity, safety, health, and freedom of expression, among other rights, and sees their own voice as fundamental to the process (Unicef, 1989). Furthermore, Corsaro suggests that children are not only playing active roles in their individual socialization and development, but are also contributing to and constructing their own peer cultures through shared interaction, building and maintaining strong communal bonds, pretend play, responsibilities, and jobs (1997; 2003). James and Prout (2015) also acknowledge this shift to recognizing children’s active creation of society and culture:

The traditional consignment of childhood to the margins of the social sciences or its primary location within the fields of developmental psychology and education is, then, beginning to change: it is now much more common to find acknowledgement that childhood should be regarded as a part of society and culture rather than a precursor to it.

(p. xi)

Rather than children being viewed as precursors to or not-yet-real parts of society and culture, their everyday actions, experiences, and well-being as citizens in their own right are now being legitimized through research.

**Exploring Children’s Social Capital**

This shift in studying and measuring children’s development through the lens and voices of adults over their lives (namely parents and educators), to focusing on the voices and agency of children, has also been reflected more recently in some beginning research around social capital and how it develops in children (Eriksson, Asplund, & Sellström, 2010; Harpham, 2002; Krasny, Kalbacker, Stedman, & Russ, 2015; Leonard, 2005; Morrow, 1999, 2004; Offer & Schneider, 2007). Social capital has many different definitions (to be discussed in the next section), but generally refers to relationships, support, trust, reciprocity, and the resources they afford, that
exist within communities or support the development of communities. Similar to studies of child
development and childhood, the research of social capital as it pertains to children has been
initially mostly focused on children as passive agents who receive or have access to social capital
through parents and networks of adults in their lives. As the research around children has grown
from conceptualizing children as passive to active constructors in their own development, the
research around children’s social capital has begun to grow in relation to the larger recognition
of children’s role in society and culture, how they navigate and contribute to society and culture,
and how to study this most effectively by recognizing children as active agents with important
voices of their own.

Chapter 2: Major Theories of Social Capital

As mentioned above, social capital has been conceptualized in many different ways, and
it is important to be clear in this paper about how I am using the term. I will begin by reviewing
three well-known theories of James Coleman, Pierre Bourdieu, and Robert Putnam.

James Coleman: Information Channels, Effective Norms, Trust

Coleman defines social capital as part of social structure—existing in relations between
and amongst actors—that facilitates an individual or collective action. He also seems to suggest
that social capital is more of a neutral resource in that it depends on the context and can be used
toward any individual or collective action. Coleman theorizes that it is comprised of information
channels, effective norms, and trust (Coleman, 1988). Information channels live in relationships
and refer to the potential for acquiring useful information through other people; these channels
are important because they facilitate individual or collective action. Effective norms are the
expectations or rules that are followed by members of the community. Coleman particularly
notes the importance of closure of social networks (connections amongst networks so that there
are no structural holes in the system of networks) in creating and reinforcing the obligations and expectations of the community—making norms effective when being followed. For example, he notes the importance of a network of parents and educators to be connected with other parents and educators of the same school, which he refers to as “intergenerational closure.” These relationships that connect adults who are involved in children’s school and home lives allow effective norms in each setting (school and home/family) to be established and reinforced in both settings. For example, school rules or expectations can be reinforced both at school and at home because the parent is aware of the expectations due to the relationship with the teacher, and vice versa. If the parents and educators were not connected to each other, the open structural holes in this system of networks would weaken the effectiveness of norms.

Trust is created and bolstered by these effective norms and, Coleman suggests, can be conceptualized through a model of “credit slips” (Coleman, 1988). Each time there is an interaction or exchange amongst people, there is a figurative “credit slip” billed/exchanged that will be fulfilled/repaid or doled out at the next interaction or exchange. Coleman suggests that in a community where there is a large amount of outstanding “credit slips,” people are always doing things for each other and this can create a community of interdependence and trust.

Trustworthiness, reciprocally, can also allow for the proliferation of obligations and expectations that benefit everyone in the community, not just the individuals who are actively interacting and exchanging within the community.

**Pierre Bourdieu: Resources and Inequality**

Contrary to Coleman, Bourdieu conceptualizes social capital not only as the quality of relationships between people in a community, but primarily as the resources derived from more institutionalized relationships of associations:
Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21)

Also in opposition to Coleman, he views social capital as primarily rooted in economic capital and as a negatively-functioning resource for society. He suggests that social capital is comprised of resources accrued by socially- and economically-privileged individuals and groups, “a product of an endless effort at institution…in order to produce and reproduce lasting, useful relationships that can secure material or symbolic profits” (ibid, p. 22). Because it has a “multiplier effect” on other capital one already possesses, he argues that social capital bolsters socioeconomic differences and inequality. Thus, differences in access to and control of social capital may explain why those with similar amounts of economic and cultural capital (e.g., money and education) may end up having different levels of profit and power. Bourdieu emphasizes the importance of social capital in creating and perpetuating these inequalities, and also in being converted into other forms of capital (economic and cultural) that exist as profit and power.

**Robert Putnam: Social Organization and Civic Engagement**

Whereas Bourdieu and Coleman view social capital as a possession of individuals or groups within communities, Putnam views social capital as belonging to and measured within an entire community. Contrary to Bourdieu’s view of social capital as having a negative societal value and Coleman’s view of it having a neutral value, Putnam considers social capital to be a positive resource for communities, producing civic engagement, a key component of democracy.
and as one that is dangerously on the decline in the United States (Putnam, 1995; 2005). Though he differs from Coleman’s view in the valence of social capital, the components to which he refers are quite similar to Coleman’s: “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, p. 2). He also refers to two specific types of social ties—bonding and bridging. Bonding social ties are inward-looking and reinforce and strengthen group identity, whereas bridging ties are outward-looking and overcome social differences/separations between groups within the community (Putnam, 2000).

Putnam came to his conclusion that the United States is declining in social capital by measuring social capital through “horizontal ties” (ibid, p. 10) of neighborliness (how frequently people spend time with people in their neighborhood) and membership in social organizations. This decline is suggested to be concerning because it is social capitals’ networks of civic engagement that bolster norms of generalized reciprocity and trust—two pivotal components of community and democracy.

Chapter 3: Social Capital in Relation to Children

Coleman, Putnam, Bourdieu: Major Theories Addressing Children

Of the three theorists, Coleman has most directly addressed children in his writing, and has done so through his examination of families and schools. He views social capital as the medium through which children access their parents’ financial (money/economic resources) and human capital (parent skills, education, social networks). Thus, their social capital can be measured by the quantity and quality of networks connecting children with their parents’ resources (Coleman, 1987; 1988). Coleman also suggests that parents’ human capital must be complemented by social capital in family relations in order to have impact on children’s
development. For example, if a parent is highly educated and intelligent, this will not have an impact on the child’s development unless the parent and child have a relationship that exists in shared interaction and educative time spent together. However, in his consideration of family social capital, he fails to take into account the added benefits of social capital networks with siblings or with extended family (especially considering there are households comprised of multiple generations and extended family members)—and narrowly focuses “family social capital” only on parent-child relationships.

While emphasizing the importance of parent-child relationships, Coleman (1987) notes a general decline in “hierarchical authority” throughout society and family: “This has not been a move from a hierarchical structure to a communitarian form, but a move away from strong relations of any sort” (p. 35). He continues to relate this decline in hierarchical authority to a decline in strong relationships across generations in modern Western society. In Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore’s (1982) study (as cited in Coleman, 1987), they found that over a two-year period, the dropout rate was lowest in Catholic high schools—lower than that of a public and non-Catholic private high schools. They also found similar low dropout rates in other non-Catholic religious schools. After extensive examination, they surmised that the church-and-school community created social capital beyond the family that supported the children’s education. Furthermore, they concluded that religious organizations created such strong social capital because of the cross-generational relationships between children and adults that they afforded. In other words, they were among the few remaining areas in which children could gain access to the social capital of adult communities—in line with Coleman’s aforementioned notions of children accessing social capital through their parents and intergenerational closure (relationships amongst parents of children within the same school community). This discussion
of intergenerational closure amongst Catholic schools and family communities is the main
demonstration of children’s access to social capital outside of the nuclear family that appears in
Coleman’s work.

Putnam likewise heavily emphasizes the decline in family relationships and social capital,
and argues that it can be tied to changes in leisure activities, family structure, and women’s roles,
that have de-centralized the family (2000). He suggests that an increase in individual television-
watching has replaced quality time interacting with family and friends (not just the cross-
generational relationships as suggested by Coleman), thus weakening social relationships that
facilitate cooperation and coordination. He also suggests that family cohesion has been
weakened by changing structure—including increase in divorce and single-parent homes, fewer
children per home, and women leaving their families to work outside of the home. However,
Putnam mostly uses these distinctions to explain the general lack of trust in institutions and civic
participation—which address mostly adult activities, as afforded by the United States—as
opposed to exploring roles of more personal social networks in which children more directly
participate.

Bourdieu’s work does not look deeply into children or families, likely because of his
focus on its general use as a tool for the reproduction of inequality. His mentions of children
relate to his discussion of cultural capital (e.g., knowledge, academic credentials) working in
conjunction with social capital to reproduce inequality. Specifically, that privileged children
acquire cultural and social capital through habitus (their predispositions and values often
inherited unconsciously early on) that benefits them through the aforementioned multiplier effect
to reproduce social inequality in a particular field such as school (Bourdieu, 1986). Thus, he
views children as passive recipients of habitus, and acted upon by reproduced inequality, rather than active participants using or creating social capital in their community.

**Overall Concept of Children within Social Capital**

As noted in an earlier mention of Prout and James (1997), children are not absent, but silenced in the research. Children’s social capital is often conceptually viewed as parent social capital to which children have access—and I am referring to this here as family social capital. In research that does recognize children’s own social capital, it is often measured through indirect means, mediated through parent or educator interviews (e.g., about children’s friendships and extracurricular activities) as opposed to asking children themselves. This lack of recognition of children’s agency and perspectives has not gone unnoticed. The concept of social capital, as it had been applied to children and youth in studies through the 1990s, failed to account for children’s influence on their own environments, viewed children only as by-products of their parents’ social capital, and thus rendered their social capital networks invisible (Morrow 1999; Leonard 2005). Furthermore, Leonard (2005) suggests even greater challenges for children using social capital due to adult conceptions of them: “Children may experience specific difficulties in converting social capital into other forms because conception of children as ‘naturally incompetent’ may prevent them from accumulating stocks of social capital” (p. 619). She additionally suggests that, different from adults, children value social capital for their more immediate use value (e.g., the relationship itself) than their longer term exchange value (e.g., economic or cultural capital to which it can be converted).

Though the valence of social capital differs amongst Coleman, Bourdieu, and Putnam, much of social capital research around children seems to view and measure social capital as a positive resource due to its positive outcomes for children, parents, and the communities around
them. Because more of the work of Coleman and those who have built upon his theory focuses on children than the other two major theorists of social capital, most of the work discussed in this paper relates to his type of social capital research.

In terms of outcomes for children, social capital has been reviewed, in both quantitative (mostly surveys and test scores) and qualitative (mostly focus groups and individual interviews) studies, for its relationship to academic achievement, development, and emotional well-being. Many studies analyze social capital as a predictor for or correlated with high academic achievement in the forms of low high school dropout rates, high gains in math achievement, and high test scores (Coleman, 1987; Dufur, Parcel, & Troutman, 2013; Freeman & Condron, 2011; Schlee, Mullis & Shriner, 2009). Particularly for early childhood, this “academic achievement” has instead been considered and measured as language and behavioral development or ability (Dufur, Parcel, & McKune, 2008; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994; Jones & Shen, 2014). Social capital’s relationship to children’s emotional well-being has been measured in terms of a sense of general happiness, self-esteem, and low depression (Eriksson, Asplund, & Sellström, 2010; Farrell, Tayler, & Tennant, 2004; Lau & Li, 2011; Offer & Schneider, 2007; Parcel & Bixby, 2016). In addition to emotional well-being, researchers have also investigated correlations between social capital and the physical health of the family, including children, in measuring oral health, use of dental care, access to healthcare, health complaints, and general physical well-being (Elgar, Trites, & Boyce, 2010; Eriksson, Hochwälder, Carlsund, & Sellström, 2012; Fujiwara, Takao, Iwase, Hamada, & Kawachi, 2012; Iida & Rozier, 2013; Sujarwoto & Tampubolon, 2013). Other studies focus on social capital in child-centered programs as a vehicle that enables parents to acquire other types of capital, such as human capital and economic capital (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999; Shan, Muhajarine, Loptson, & Jeffery, 2012; Shoji,
Haskins, Rangel, & Sorensen, 2014; Vesely, Ewaida, & Kearney, 2013) and that allows for community development (Findlay, 2014).

As these studies have explored children as a crucial elements of, agents in, and beneficiaries of social capital networks in the 1990s through to the present day, the aforementioned differences in how children’s social capital is understood (or not understood well) have also extended to the literature and research on children’s social capital. So far I have reviewed how social capital is accessed by children and related to positive outcomes for them and their communities, and will later review how social capital is created by children themselves. Before introducing child-created social capital, I will review how the differences in social capital conceptualizations are also apparent in how it is measured, contextual differences, and implications for the development of community. This complexity of measuring and conceptualizing children’s social capital is explored in the next section of this paper.

Chapter 4: Complexity of Children’s Social Capital Measurement

Social Capital Definition and Confusion

As evidenced by the earlier review of the three major social capital theories (Coleman, Putnam, Bourdieu), there is quite a bit of variety in the definitions of social capital and theorized models of how it works. Some of these differences are central to the study of social capital across disciplines and people groups; but some are quite specific to the study of children’s social capital—and the complexity that has arisen due to the challenges with conceptualizing children as agents, rather than as passive recipients of capital from their parents.

Several researchers have noted the difficulty with distinguishing between factors that are forms of social capital itself, indicators of social capital, causes of social capital, or effects of
social capital (Harpham, 2002; Morrow, 2004; Shoji et al., 2014). The difficulty with confusing these factors is that without agreement upon which of these factors are forms of social capital, studies that claim to measure social capital may actually be measuring its causes, effects, or mixtures of these things with forms of social capital; and the studies cannot be easily compared to gain a wider understanding of the breadth of social capital. Some authors are more aware than others in how their conceptualization of social capital differs and impacts their measurement as such. For example, Shoji et al. (2014) specifically state that they identify levels of trust, mutual expectations, and shared values in a network as indicators of social capital, but contend that information channels and effective norms are its potential effects—parting from Coleman’s definition of social capital as being comprised of trust, information channels, and effective norms. Specifically relating to the body of work on children’s social capital, Morrow (2005) notes that it is sometimes confusingly equated with success—creating more of a descriptive model, instead of an explanatory model, of children’s social capital that basically says that those who have success will be successful.

Others have measured social capital by looking at one of its forms or types and using the term almost synonymously with social capital. Collective efficacy is one of these types of social capital (Jones & Shen, 2014; Sampson et al., 1999). Jones & Shen (2014) define collective efficacy as “indicated by the level of trust and attachment among neighbors, the extent of informal social control, and degree to which collective goals can be achieved” (p. 3). Similar to Coleman’s definition of social capital, collective efficacy captures the importance of trust and effective norms (informal social control) that work toward achieving a group goal. Social support is another form (and indicator) of social capital that has been explored in studies that particularly look at how parents acquire social capital through their children or through child-centered
settings (Offer & Schneider, 2007; Vesely et al., 2013). Offer & Schneider (2007) described social support as a resource that flows between individuals in a network and as being helpful in working towards a particular goal—similar to Coleman’s definition. They then examined factors such as family structure, friendship quality, and popularity to determine their relationship with social support, and thus implications for social capital. The combined difficulty of different definitions and layers of considering influences of parent/family and school capital on children becomes quite confusing and calls for any author writing on this subject to clearly lay out in advance the meanings of their own particular use of terms.

**Categories, Components and Measurement**

There are different theories about the categories of social capital and how they should be conceptualized in order to accurately measure children’s social capital. Finer divisions can allow for a better understanding of how social capital operates. For this reason, some have examined social capital in two forms: structural social capital and cognitive social capital (Harpham, 2002; Lau & Li, 2011). Structural social capital refers to programs, availability of people, number of relationships, and frequency of contact that may allow for the development of social capital. Cognitive social capital refers to a sense of trust and strength of relationships that may be developed through structural social capital. We might say that structural capital offers the skeletal components that support the development of social capital, while cognitive social capital refers to the strength of social capital bonds. Some more quantitative studies use survey questions to determine amounts of structural and cognitive social capital possessed by individuals, families, and schools.

A similar division of components of social capital is a distinction between social and structural social capital processes (Shoji et al., 2014). Social refers to interactional processes...
among members of a social network (e.g., conversations, playing together), while structural refers to conditions that shape those interactional processes (e.g., frequency of school meetings, how far or close children/friends live from each other). Shoji et al. (2014) used this framework to inform their qualitative evaluation of how an 8-week after-school program for families helped develop social capital in children and families. This distinction differs from the aforementioned structural vs. cognitive social capital in that it does not account specifically for the strength of the interactions (i.e., trust). Perhaps this is so because Shoji et al. (2014) developed a qualitative study where the strength of such interactions and trust was inherently captured through focus groups and individual interviews. For example, a discussion about the frequency of conversations and school meetings (elements of Shoji’s social vs. structural social processes) could likely also extend to a discussion about the strength of the relationships formed in these conversations and meetings, as they may have been asking more open-ended interview questions. Conversely, the previously mentioned cognitive vs. structural division employed in more quantitative surveys would not be able to naturally capture information about the strength of relationships without explicitly asking simply because they are closed-ended multiple-choice type questions; and thus its cognitive vs. structural division was designed to explicitly capture this information.

Another categorical difference that has impacted the measurement of children’s social capital is the distinction between individual and collective features (Harpham, 2002). Because social capital is based on relationships amongst people, the question of measuring social capital as an individual versus collective possession or quality is inherently complicated. As evidenced by Coleman’s (1987) distinction between family and school social capital and Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological systems theory, there are different layers of influence with which children
interact. Children’s social capital research has mirrored this acknowledgment by measuring children’s social capital as part of a community/neighborhood social capital, school social capital, family social capital, parent social capital, and (more recently) children’s own social capital. Within each of these layers, researchers have wrestled with questions of how to best measure social capital—as individual or collective features—and particularly in more quantitative studies. Lau & Li (2011), for example, have recognized some cognitive social capital measures as individual features, namely a child’s sense of support and trust in relationships with parents and friends, and social involvement. Others have measured social capital as a collective feature for families and schools either by averaging individual parent scores within a family or geographical area (Jones & Shen, 2014; Offer & Schneider 2007) or by surveying a school administrator for a self-reported rating on the indexes that explore the average/overall state of the school-parent relationship (Dufur et al., 2008). This may point to a conceptual distinction between benefits reaped by individuals versus all people within a community. This leads to my discussion of the different levels of networks and settings reviewed in children’s social capital research.

**Types of Social Capital: Individual, Family, School, Neighborhood, Institution**

Social capital has been conceptualized as a possession of the individual (by Coleman and Bourdieu), of groups (Coleman), and of larger community and institutional networks or associations of people (Bourdieu and Putnam). In framing the types of networks and relationships explored in children’s social capital research, there seem to be two major bucket areas of focus: 1) closer relationships of family and school, and 2) more distant relationships of neighborhood and institutions. Authors have conceptualized these different types of networks in various ways. Putnam (1995) referred to informal (friendships, family), voluntary (sports and
youth clubs), and formal (local government) networks of relationships. Eriksson et al. (2010) distinguished between thick trust (close personal relationships in family and school) and thin trust (local people in the community who are not personally known). In many cases, the distinction between these types of networks was made in order to move away from the family/school capital upon which much of the earlier children’s social capital research has focused and more on neighborhood and institutional effects.

While all conceptualizations of social capital are based upon the qualities of the social relationship between people, some authors focus on the degree to which individuals can hold and utilize their social capital for individual rather than for some collective benefit. While Coleman (1988) suggests that social capital can be used by individuals or groups to facilitate a particular action or goal that can be positive or negative, his writing around families mostly focuses on social capital being a positive resource to which children can have access through their parents. Here, he argues that social capital has the positive value of being able to be used by individuals to facilitate a particular action while Bourdieu argues that because of this it can be a means of achieving exclusion and creating inequality between people. Putnam reserves the term for something that is possessed by communities of people and thereby benefits all of the members of that community, even though some of them may not have been active in creating it. In this paper I move through this confusing territory by offering prefixes to my terminology: individual social capital, family social capital, school social capital, neighborhood social capital and so on. When carried within an individual, social capital can be used by an individual in different settings such as the school or home. When held by a group such as a family, organization, or neighborhood, it can benefit all of the members of the group by association.
Sociologists have more recently begun to recognize the individual social capital of children, created by children, through their participation in school activities, extra-curricular activities, friendships inside and outside of school, and jobs/working (Camfield, 2012; Eriksen & Mulugeta, 2016; Eriksson et al., 2010; Karsten, 2011; Leonard, 2005; Morrow, 1999; Morrow 2004; Offer & Schneider, 2007; Sime & Fox, 2015; Stephenson, 2001; Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick, & Bulsara, 2013; Weller & Bruegel, 2009). Each of these forms of participation that create social capital can be used in different settings and contribute to the overall social capital of various groups.

**Family social capital.** Family social capital has been conceptualized as existing amongst the relationships of members of a nuclear family—including parents, children, siblings. However, beginning with Coleman’s (1987) early conception of social capital as something that is possessed by parents and accessed by children through their parents, there has been a focus on measuring parent social capital to determine the family social capital. In fact, several studies use pre-existing data sets (e.g., ECLS, NELS) or parent interviews to measure social capital based on parent involvement in school and marital status (Freeman & Condron, 2011; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994; Schlee et al., 2009; Shoji et al., 2014). In a shift to viewing the children as active agents, other studies have built upon these studies of parent social capital to explore how parents actually access social capital through their children (Freeman & Condron, 2011; Offer & Schneider, 2007; Vesely et al., 2013). It is not only parents’ investment in their children’s development that creates social capital (as suggested by Coleman), but children themselves also mediate processes of intergenerational closure by acting as “social brokers” in developing friendships with other children and connecting their parents with their friends’ parents (Offer & Schneider, 2007, p. 1226). Vesely et al. (2013) also discovered that parents use early childhood
education settings to build human, social, and navigational capital via friendship formation during drop off/pick up times, field trips, and other calls/meetings outside of school. Thus, for many of these studies, looking at social capital within families with young children almost requires that they also look at school social capital because of how closely those networks (or microsystems, according to Bronfenbrenner) are tied.

In two studies, Dufur compared effects of family and school social capital, and found that family social capital is a stronger predictor of behavioral adjustment and academic achievement than school social capital (Dufur et al., 2008; Dufur et al., 2013). Furthermore, as noted earlier, his studies suggest that these may not so much be two different forms of social capital, but that social capital is created by children, families, and communities, and then used in different contexts—like school and family. Offer & Schneider (2007) suggest that as children get older, they exercise greater autonomy in their socialization, and thus move away from parents being the main influence on their social circles and development to peers in school being a stronger influence. Thus, as children grow older, it becomes more important to investigate their social capital development in school rather than only within their families.

**School social capital.** School social capital has been measured quantitatively by examining children’s participation in activities, teacher morale, teachers’ responsiveness, school environment (Dufur et al., 2008; Dufur et al., 2013) and also, more qualitatively, in how it functions to support friendship formation in children (Eriksson et al., 2010; Farrell et al., 2004). Several qualitative evaluations of early childhood schools and after-school programs have examined their effectiveness in bolstering social capital development for parents and families by connecting them with other parents and educational, health, and other informational resources (Shan et al., 2012; Shoji et al., 2014; Vesely et al., 2013). Offer & Schneider (2007) propose that
this boost in parent and family social capital development is a function of children connecting their parents to parents of their peers from school (thereby creating what Coleman referred to as “intergenerational closure” that bolsters social capital). Whereas the accounts of social capital within the family that have been discussed in this section largely depict children as passive recipients of the social capital created by their parents, within school settings children are highly active in building social capital, particularly through the friendships they create and the activities in which they participate with their peers.

**Neighborhood social capital.** Putnam’s (1995; 2000) conceptualization of social capital in adults has focused on social capital at the neighborhood scale. In his conceptualization, social capital is composed of mainly relatively weak ties of neighborliness, general sense of trust, and civic engagement/participation. These networks have been conceptualized as “thin trust” (Eriksson et al., 2010) and “weak ties” (Freeman & Condron, 2011) because of the emotional or personal distance that may exist between them and children. However, Freeman & Condron (2011) note that extracurricular activities enable children to acquire additional supportive contacts with other adults outside of the family and school, which in turn can grant them access to other institutions and resources in the community for educational assistance. Sampson and Morenoff (1999) explored neighborhoods and spatial dynamics, and discovered the importance of physical proximity to areas with high intergenerational closure, reciprocal exchange, and expected norms (features of social capital) in the development of children’s social capital, in the form of collective efficacy. Jones & Shen (2014) found that these neighborhood effects on social capital also have a developmental impact on young children. They observed that greater neighborhood social capital (in the form of collective efficacy) was correlated with stronger development of communication skills in preschoolers, particularly in receptive vocabulary.
development. As different groups within a community can possess their own social capital (e.g., schools, families, churches, social clubs), neighborhood/community social capital can be seen in part as the aggregate of these.

**Institutional social capital.** Beyond the individual people in one’s neighborhood and community, others have noted the great impact of institutions within the community that may not interact directly with children, but still impact children’s development of social capital. They have explored institutions as mediators and distributors of social capital, for example, in the form of local governances for early childhood education. Findlay (2014) reviewed the types of early childhood local governance regimes in British Columbia and argues for early childhood development to be seen as a collective responsibility that requires a “community democracy” approach relying on community capacity-building. Simultaneously, she asserts that this approach should also involve state-supported social capital distribution, instead of replacing the state’s responsibility to care for the community (which some states do by placing the social capital distribution responsibility more on local/community organizations). This also points to a larger question of culture, context, and environmental differences that may impact how children, families, and communities view and develop social capital. This will be further explored later in this paper.

**Social capital created by children, used in different contexts.** As evidenced by this review of social capital forms and levels, it can be difficult to examine or compare social capital across studies because researchers may define these types/levels of social capital differently and because these types of social capital often interact and overlap. The types of group-level social capital described above were mostly reviewed as forms of social capital created by adults that can impact children’s development, with some examples of how children can also contribute to
social capital in these settings. I would like to focus next on these latter examples. I suggest that children can and do develop their own social capital and use it in these various contexts. For the remainder of this paper, I will be specifically examining social capital that is created and used by children in different settings (including family, school, and neighborhood) and how children thus contribute to the social capital of the group (including family, school, and neighborhood social capital). I will first review literature that explores social capital created and used by children in middle childhood and adolescence, and then transition to an investigation of how young children develop social capital through the associations that they actively construct with peers in their early years.

Chapter 5: Social Capital Created by Children in Middle Childhood and Adolescence

Much of the social capital literature on children focuses specifically on middle childhood and/or adolescence (age 8-18) probably because this is a period of increased independence or autonomy from their parents, allowing them greater agency to create their own social capital through friendships (Morrow, 2004; Offer & Schneider, 2007; Weller & Bruegel, 2009). This section will move beyond Coleman’s (1988) notion of children’s social capital that is limited by its narrow view of the nuclear family (particularly parent relationships), and will extend to children’s relationships with siblings, friends, and neighbors. Because social networks are considered to be the building blocks of social capital (Karsten, 2011), children’s friendships across contexts/environments are crucial to explore in our understanding of their social capital production.

Research on social capital that children create and use themselves has focused mostly on children’s relationships in school and in the larger neighborhood/community. Children play an important role in facilitating the development of community cohesion and social capital directly
through their own actions/friendship formations, and indirectly through providing connections and networks for parents and other community members (Offer & Schneider, 2007; Weller & Bruegel, 2009). The most reviewed types of relationships include: friendships with peers at school, friendships with peers in the neighborhood, relationships with adults in the neighborhood, and relationships with adults in a working environment. I will first review children’s relationships with peers, where they are perhaps most able to purely develop their own social capital in the absence of adults, and will then review children’s relationships with adults that also allow them to develop social capital. In each of these sections, I will discuss how Coleman’s social capital forms of effective norms and expectations, information channels, and trust/reciprocity are developed through children’s social networks of relationships. A theme across each of these studies has been the importance of context and differences based on the structure of environment, the demographics of the population, and ethnic culture(s) of the area. Each of these contextual differences allows for varying degrees of agency that permit children to develop their own social capital.

Creating Social Capital through Relationships with Peers

**Neighborhood social capital: outdoor play.** Perhaps the strongest level of social capital can be developed by children at the neighborhood level—outside of school, home, church, or any other adult-led group. I suggest this because children’s agency (i.e., freedom to act independently) is required to create these social network building blocks of social capital; and their agency is arguably much greater when given freedom to choose how they spend their time and effort, outside the direction of adults.

Outdoor play in the streets is a common site for such freedom and agency for children. It can also be viewed as a reflection of level of trust developed in a neighborhood, and the degree
to which common norms, values, and reciprocity have been established (Morrow, 2004; Weller & Bruegel, 2009). Play outside of school is also more significantly related to social support for children than in-school activities (Offer & Schneider, 2007). Karsten (2011) discovered that social networks in three neighborhoods in Amsterdam vary from each other and also from what they looked like 50 years ago in terms of outdoor play due to changes in children’s schooling, physical makeup of a neighborhood, and an increase in ethnic diversity. Within her surveyed neighborhoods, it appears that the strongest level of children’s social capital (for children ages 7-12) was created through what Karsten (2011) calls “street culture.” This refers to the culture and networks of children’s relationships formed by playing together in the streets. She noted that only 1 of the 3 neighborhoods she studied still had children who play outside together to develop this “street culture”—Wognummerstraat. In this particular neighborhood, children tended to play in larger mixed age, gender, and race groups—in contrast to in-school interactions where children are usually in same-age, same-gender groups. Wognummerstraat also had high levels of mutual trust, such that children could simply ring the doorbell or rattle the letterbox of each other’s houses to gather friends for outside play. They were able to do this because children had a high degree of agency and little parent interference in their after-school time.

The physical makeup of a neighborhood can also bolster or limit outdoor play. Karsten (2011) found that Wognummerstraat had wider pavements and fewer cars parked outside than the others—allowing children the physical space to play outside and develop their “street culture” and networks. I suggest that this was the strongest form of children’s social capital she discussed because children in this neighborhood seemed to have the highest degree of agency and were able to build both bonding (with children who were like them at school) and bridging social capital (with their ethnically diverse child neighbors). Karsten notes that 50 years ago, all three
neighborhoods she examined were arenas for such common outdoor play with children from various backgrounds, and thus high degrees of social capital.

In addition to the leisure and trust-developing aspects of play, social capital development through play can also be instrumental in acquiring other forms of capital. In Ethiopia, Camfield (2012) found that children in urban areas also build their local networks with neighbors through playing football. For them, playing football is not just a social outlet, but joining a football team could also be a network through which they can acquire a job.

Outdoor play can be limited due to physical makeup of neighborhood and homes, ethnic divisions, and children’s schooling. Karsten (2011) notes that in addition to narrow pavements and large cars parked in the streets, Van Breestraat and Bankstraat—the other two neighborhoods in the Karsten study—also had much more alluring indoor spaces with large bedrooms and a variety of indoor play equipment that resulted in much more play inside the home with parent-selected or parent-approved playmates (usually from school or extracurricular clubs). Parents can also have a hand in selecting playmates through school selection. Attending local secondary schools can better enable children to develop and access social capital networks situated within their neighborhoods (Karsten, 2011; Weller & Bruegel, 2009). Whereas 50 years ago, children attended local schools in their Amsterdam neighborhoods, Karsten (2011) found that parents are now able to select children’s secondary schools, which are often outside of their local neighborhoods and mostly comprised of children of similar race and socioeconomic status. Parents and children in Van Breestraat seem to be aware of this lack of child-created social networks:

A mother in Van Breestraat says, ‘Many children live in this street, but they don’t all go to the same school. A boy of his [son’s] age lives two or three houses down this street,
but they never play together…’ Her son confirmed this situation and added that he sometimes regretted not knowing how to start up a friendship with a child of his own age living so close by. (Karsten, 2011, p. 1662)

For these children, school may be the center of building social networks and capital. Some children do attend more ethnically-diverse schools and these become the sites of their bridging social capital development. However, Karsten notes that while they have opportunities to engage with different children, their closest friends still tend to be those of the same ethnicity and socioeconomic status—which could be due to the aforementioned parent selection of playmates.

Parent connectivity and involvement in the neighborhood can also impact children’s contributions to neighborhood social capital, particularly play opportunities (Morrow, 2004). Parents who are more actively involved in their community may be more likely to afford children greater autonomy (Weller & Bruegel, 2009). Karsten (2011) observed a difficulty in building mutual trust with the increase in ethnic diversity, as more Turkish and Moroccan families migrated there and fewer parents socialized with each other. For migrant families, the ethnically-based family circle and particularly their ethnically-based mosques (e.g., Turkish mosque, Moroccan mosque) were the centers of social network development—seen as much safer for their children than the streets. For these migrant children, their school relationships end in school and do not continue in the streets, as friendships did 50 years ago in these Amsterdam neighborhoods.

**School social capital: friendships with classmates.** Much of the research around children’s social capital created in school has focused also on migrant and refugee children, for whom social capital can be a great bolster for success. Though there are certainly challenges for
these children in entering a new community and school system, some have actively worked to secure their own social capital through making friends who serve as information channels to learn about the norms of the school and community (Sime & Fox, 2015; Weller, 2010). Sime & Fox (2015) found that intra-ethnic bonding amongst migrant children (ages 7-16) allowed for greater access to local services:

We had our ‘gang’ at school, I used to call it that. We had a special table in the corridor and we met there during breaks. We'd gather together, all Poles, and talk about what things are like here, where can you go to a safe park, go swimming for free, buy Polish food…And just talk about life in Scotland, about the rubbish weather (laughs). (Zofia, Polish, age 12)

This ‘gang’ at school served as information channels that they used to acquire other resources such as leisure spaces and Polish food; it also served as a source of support and mutual trust, where they could bond over talking about life in their new country (Scotland) and its “rubbish weather.”

School friendships are also a source of social capital development for non-migrant children as well in the same forms of information channels and trust/reciprocity (Eriksson et al., 2010; Lau & Li, 2011; Morrow, 2004; Offer & Schneider, 2007; Shoji et al., 2014; Weller, 2010). Non-migrant children’s formation of social capital with peers in schools may have been less examined in the literature compared to specific migrant populations because children making friends in school may just be a well-accepted assumption—and investigated more as general friendship formation rather than children’s generation of social capital. These peer school relationships may have also been less examined in the social capital literature because much of the literature focuses more on the function of these peer relationships for connecting
their parents with other parents/adults in the community—contributing to Coleman’s notion of intergenerational closure and neighborhood/community social capital. Wood et al. (2013) refer to these as secondary target groups: “Formal and institutionalized groups may create formal networks for their primary target group (i.e., as a school does for its students and staff) while fostering informal networks and connectedness among secondary target groups such as parents” (p. 354).

**Family social capital: relationships with siblings.** Similar to the above note about the focus on children creating social capital for parents, much of social capital research has focused more on parent social capital as a measure of family social capital without taking siblings into consideration (Morrow, 1999). More recent research has touched on the value of sibling relationships in bolstering family social support, and many in discussion of families with non-Western ethnic backgrounds.

While exploring the lives of urban Ethiopian children, Camfield (2012) noted the strength of the family as a cultural norm. There is a great deal of reciprocity amongst familial relationships in which children expect to receive support from older siblings, while caring for and supporting younger siblings. In addition, as girls get older, they are expected to spend less time with friends and more time at home helping raise their siblings and helping around the house. In this instance, while there may be a decrease in individual social capital (in fewer relationships outside of the home), this allows girls to contribute more to their family social capital.

Weller (2010) also noted the cultural norm of family support that bolstered the production of social capital for a Nigerian family. A mother strived to instill Nigerian and
Catholic values of discipline, respect, and strong family bonds in her sons, while they lived in the United Kingdom. Thanks to her efforts, one of her sons, Michael, demonstrated a sense of connection and willingness to support his brothers: “I think you should help your brother with their work because sometimes if I get stuck I ask my older brother and he’ll help me so it is good ’cos what you know could always help if you pass it on to your little brother” (Weller, 2010, p. 878). By helping and receiving homework help from his brothers, Michael and his brothers served as information channels for educational information. They also simultaneously built family trust as they exemplified the cultural norms his parents wished to pass on to him.

**Community social capital: living and working with other children.** Whereas outdoor play can be an opportunity for some children to escape parental control and exercise their own agency, others have this parent-free opportunity for agency daily—in youth and working communities. Stephenson (2001) examined the Arbat System—a youth community in a pedestrian precinct of Moscow that is composed of a complex structure of extensive relationships, mostly free of adults. Many of these children, ages 8-18, have run away from home, and found refuge and freedom in this community, often desiring careers in organized crime or as militiamen when they grow up. The community is composed of various groups including punks, hippies, and Satanists. They freely migrate between various groups by following the entry protocol for each group—part of the effective norms they learn as they exist in community. Arbat is a center of informal trade of souvenirs, drug dealing, drinking, poetry, street musicians, and prostitution. Children are able to secure work, shelter, food, and quasi-familial relationships in this community by learning the norms, reinforcing the norms, and building trust with its members. For example, a norm of the community prohibits stealing and begging, but allows for approaching individuals to request food, money, or cigarettes—the
expectation being that everyone helps everyone else without judgment. While a prevailing notion has been that street children are psychologically damaged, and live and work in disarray, Stephenson’s exploration of the Arbat System illustrates a complex, youth-organized network with structures and rules, by which children have been able to develop their own social networks and capital.

Eriksen & Mulugeta (2016) similarly explored the lives of working children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia where 52% of children ages 5-17 are working (CSA 2002:41, as cited by Eriksen & Mulugeta, 2016). Many of them came to Addis Ababa to escape the poverty of the countryside. Some live with siblings or extended family; some come alone and survive through the networks they create in the city. Their networks help them acquire resources such as food and shelter. Networks of peers, other working children, often help them find jobs (e.g., working in stores, delivering items, or doing odd jobs around the neighborhood) and teach them the norms and culture of the streets. Friends will often look after each others’ things on the streets, and will share food with each other when they know one friend may have been out of work for a bit. Children will also often pool their money together to start *equubs*, a type of savings account. Thus, children have created social capital for themselves that has been transformed into social support, physical resources (food, shelter), and economic resources (money).

**Creating Social Capital through Relationships with Adults**

Children not only create social capital through relationships with peers, but also through relationships with adults. These child-adult relationships have been more widely mentioned as examples of children’s social capital as they fall in line with the notion that children access social capital through the adults in their lives, namely parents (Coleman, 1988). However, Leonard (2005) has also suggested that interactions between adults and children are valuable because they
are likely to produce modified standards and customs for both generations. This supports Weller’s (2010) assertion that social capital formation is dynamic, fluid and an interactive process in families. Children develop social networks and capital not only within their families, but also directly with neighbors and co-workers, and indirectly through friendships they make that help connect their families with others in the community.

**Neighborhood social capital: children helping the neighbors.** Putnam (1995; 2000) was interested in the idea of neighborliness and particularly how frequently people were in contact with their neighbors. Children can contribute to this notion of neighborliness too. Weller & Bruegel (2009) found that secondary school-aged children in England actively engaged in developing bridging social capital across generations, ethnicity, and religious differences through connections with their neighbors. They often looked after neighbors’ homes, plants, and pets for a small amount of money. They would also give and receive Christmas presents and souvenirs from vacations as well. These actions allowed them to build trust and reciprocity with adults in their neighborhood, thereby contributing to the overall neighborhood social capital.

**Family and community social capital: children as intermediaries of adult social relations.** Children’s relationships with both peers and adults in different settings helps contribute to the development of family social capital by connecting their parents to the community. In this manner, children act as intermediaries of adult neighborhood social relations, contributing both to the neighborhood’s social capital and their families’ social capital (as they help their parents build social networks). In schools and in the large community outside of schools, children can widen their social networks to include both children and adults, and help them access resources for themselves and for their parents. Friendships with classmates can help connect children’s parents to the parents of their classmates, thereby creating Coleman’s (1988)
notion of intergenerational closure that further bolsters the social capital of the community (Morrow, 1999; Offer & Schneider, 2007). Additionally, relationships with teachers serve as information channels and social support for parents, particularly noted for those families who have migrated to a new country (Sime & Fox, 2015; Weller, 2010). When migrating to a new country, poorer families in particular may have much smaller social networks to begin with, and thus much less social capital than more wealthy migrant families. They may depend more heavily on schools as information channels and sources of instrumental help (Sime & Fox, 2015). Children’s relationships with teachers have allowed them to acquire information for their parents about child and family resources, as well as information about English language classes for adults (ibid). In fact, children are often instrumental for their parents as they may be responsible for filling in forms and translating for their parents (Sime & Fox, 2015; Weller, 2010). In this way, children help their parents develop bridging social capital and contribute to their family’s social capital in the forms of trust and information channels.

Children also contribute to their family’s social capital by connecting with other adults outside of school through extracurricular activities. Wood et al., (2013) found that community participation (an indicator of social capital) was higher among those adults with dependent children living at home than those without children—children can be catalysts for community involvement. Participating in activities outside of the home (e.g., sports teams, library events) allows children to develop relationships that are both beneficial to them because of access to more adults, and beneficial to their parents by enlarging their social networks and thus social capital (Morrow, 1999; Offer & Schneider, 2007; Weller & Bruegel, 2009; Wood et al., 2013). Wood et al., (2013) also note that in addition to enabling parents to form significant friendships with those adults directly connected to their child, their children’s involvement in community
activities also helps parents form friendships with new networks through rediscovering interests in sports or other hobbies and meeting new people as they use family library memberships for their own personal use. Thus, children contribute to their family social capital by directly expanding their parents’ social networks with adults in their schools and extracurricular activities, and also by indirectly inspiring and enabling their parents to contact other groups within the community.

**Community social capital: working children.** Working children are perhaps the clearest example of children’s social capital as it is mentioned quite frequently in social capital research as a means through which children develop social capital for themselves (Camfield, 2012; Eriksen & Mulugeta, 2016; Harpham, 2002; Leonard, 2005; Stephenson, 2001). When children work, they are actively constructing relationships with other adults outside of their parents. Perhaps it seems more clear-cut to analyze the social capital created by children when they are working because this is where they have a fair amount of agency and responsibility in networks of interdependent relationships. Similarly, studies of children in western cultures have noted children’s agency in finding babysitting jobs and odd jobs around the neighborhood to do, similar to helping the neighbors (Leonard, 2005; Weller & Bruegel, 2009).

Cultural norms in Ethiopia bolster the importance of responsibility and supporting an extended network of family and friends (Camfield, 2012; Eriksen & Mulugeta, 2016). In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where children come to live and work from the countryside, they not only form a network of peer relationships (as discussed in the previous section), but they also form relationships with adults in the community (Eriksen & Mulugeta, 2016). Their work lives are filled with adults including shop owners who employ them, customers, and police officers who provide instrumental assistance to them. Shop owners will often help children manage their
equubs or savings clubs by holding onto the money for children. Customers often will provide materials or financial help (loaning money) when in need. Police officers support them by providing safety as many are living in the streets. One child mentioned an instance in which a police officer also provided material resources, shoes, when he saw that the child was walking around barefoot. Thus, the network of relationships with adults, created and maintained completely by children, was instrumental to creating social capital and turning that into other forms of capital in the forms of materials, financial help, and support. These norms of reciprocity and trust that children created also helped bolster the development of community social capital.

Thus, through social networks of relationships created and maintained in middle childhood and adolescence, children around the world have been able to develop their own social capital. This is, again, in contrast to the notion that they only passively receive social capital through their parents or access social capital through other adults in their lives. The studies reviewed in this section demonstrate how children are able to actively create their individual social capital that they use in different contexts, and as a contribution to the social capital of the various group contexts in which they exist, like family, school, and neighborhood. Through relationships with both children/peers and adults, these children are able to develop trust/reciprocity, effective norms, and information channels—all three forms of social capital conceptualized by Coleman.

**Chapter 6: Social Capital Created by Young Children (Age 3-5)**

As evidenced by the previous section, children’s social capital research has mainly focused on middle childhood and adolescence, ages 8-18, possibly because they are seen as having more agency and ability to create social capital (through their own social networks) than younger children. In preschool, young children may still be viewed as passive recipients of their
parents’ social capital; they may be seen as not fully capable of developing their own social networks and capital. I disagree and instead propose that young children are active creators of their own social capital through the associations that they form with other people. Although their endeavors to form social relationships may not be acknowledged as social capital in the literature, I suggest that their friendship formations are, in fact, developing the social network building blocks of social capital.

Before proceeding to this discussion of young children’s social network development, it may be helpful to first clarify some confusions over individual ownership of social capital versus its existence in a group or community, within the major conceptualizations of social capital. Coleman focuses mostly on relationships at an individual level, like those between a child and parent or other adult. At a community-level, Coleman’s (1987) idea of social capital is of an adult being willing to involve him/herself in parenting another’s child (with whom this adult does not have a relationship), based on norms and expectations of the community. Putnam views social capital as more of a community-level trait with weaker ties that may appear more like neighborliness or familiarity. In this paper I will not explore this concept of social capital based on these relatively weaker, wide-net ties of familiarity, but rather than on the intentional networks of Coleman’s model. Here, I will demonstrate how friendships are purposeful and instrumental, and how children are aware of the friendship network structure and intentional about their social investments in friendship.

**Friendship Formation**

As the previous section was framed around Karsten’s (2011) proposal that social networks are the building blocks of social capital, similarly I propose that friendships are the building blocks of social networks. Young children actively form relationships with people
around them in their family and larger community. Contrary to Coleman, I suggest that there is value for children not only in the relationships they form with other adults (or with peers in ways that help connect their parents to other adults to form intergenerational closure), but there is great value in young children’s relationships with peers as well. Preschool classrooms are often the first environments children enter and in which they learn to interact with peers. Because it is the first community environment children encounter that more or less mirrors the larger community they will later enter as adults (Astuto & Ruck, 2010), I have chosen to focus on young children’s development of social capital through friendships at ages 3-5, including perspectives from sociology and developmental psychology.

Friendships have been conceptualized as stable relationships marked by reciprocity and shared positive affect (Howes, 1987 as cited in Howes, 1988). Particularly amongst young children, the development of friendship has been explored and measured in the forms of various features, mostly including social competence, socioemotional development, complex play, and prosocial behavior (Barbu, 2003; Guralnick & Groom, 1988; Howes, 1988, 1996; Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996; McElwain & Volling, 2005; Park et al., 1993; Vaughn, Azria, Krzysik, Caya, Bost, Newell & Kazura, 2000). Although often described as discrete elements, these friendship features are quite integrally tied to one another (Blair, Perry, O’Brien, Calkins, Keane, Shanahan, 2015; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015; Gagnon & Nagle, 2004; Hawley & Geldhof, 2012; Howes, 1988, 1996; Ostrov & Guzzo, 2015).

Social competence refers to effectiveness in social interactions that is context-specific and goal-oriented; and can be thought of as “success” in attaining social goals (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Rose-Krasnor (1997) proposes that social competence can be defined through social skills and relationships that help produce this “success.” Socioemotional development is a broad term
that refers to the convergence of social and emotional growth in ways that address issues including how emotion is expressed in social contexts, emotional effects on social situations, emotion regulation, empathy, moral cognition, and self-awareness (Thompson & Virmani, 2012). Thus, socioemotional development can be considered a component of social competence as more growth in this area can better support one’s effectiveness in social interactions. Prosocial behavior and complex play can be conceptualized as actions through which social competence is exercised and through which socioemotional development takes place. Prosocial behavior broadly refers to intentional, voluntary actions that benefit others, such as helping or sharing (Eisenberg, 1982). Complex play refers to complementary and reciprocal interactions as children engage in activity together, and “may be the best indication that the researcher can infer that the children are aware of the others as social partners” (Howes, 1996, p. 74). Thus, through exercising prosocial behavior and complex play with peers, children are taking opportunities to grow socially and emotionally, in ways that build their social competence to form friendships.

The broader concepts of social competence and socioemotional development provide a foundation for understanding how children develop friendships. However, the initiation of friendships, or how friendships first begin, is also quite informative and perhaps not as widely researched across academic disciplines (namely developmental psychology) as social competence and socioemotional development. Observations of playgrounds and classrooms have enabled researchers to explore and understand the process of friendship formation, including the beginning initiation of a peer interaction (e.g., play session). Within the discipline of sociology, Corsaro (1979, 1981, 2003) has contributed a great deal to the understanding of young children’s entry strategies or “access strategies” through his ethnographic research in nursery schools with children ages 2-5. He has discovered that children’s entering into play with peers requires time
and multiple various strategies for young children—strategies including: non-verbal entry (physical proximity to another’s play session), producing variant of ongoing behavior, offering an object, and request for access, among many others. In the realm of developmental psychology, researchers have discovered similar categories of play entry strategies through child observations.

Guralnick & Groom (1988) observed play groups of 3- and 4-year-old typically-developing and developmentally-delayed children. Of the child-to-child interactions, 75% were positive. Children displayed positive social behaviors of proximity, responsiveness to an initiation of a peer interaction, and cooperative play. Particularly interesting are the behaviors children exhibited to initiate interactions/play with a peer, including: gaining the attention of a peer, leading a peer in activities, imitating a peer, expressing affection, competing for equipment, showing pride in one’s product (e.g., art, structure built) to a peer, and following a peer’s activity without explicit direction to do so. Similarly, Park et al. (2013) observed preschoolers in a classroom and noted other additional behaviors—challenges and dares—that children used to both initiate and sustain/maintain activity with peers. Analogous to Corsaro’s (1979, 2003) discovery of the complexity of children’s play entry processes, Ely (2014) noted that some of the most effective entries into peer play are composed not of a single bid, but of a sequence of efforts often beginning with lower-risk strategies (e.g., observing and imitating) and gradually increasing to higher-risk strategies (e.g., asking to play) to attain successful entry. Children may have learned this themselves; and perhaps this understanding has contributed to their use of the various entry strategies.

These entry strategies are exercised with each interaction/play session and may become easier for children as they exercise them more frequently. Howes (1988) found that complex
social play (play sessions in which all involved children are interacting with and responding to each other) was positively associated with cooperative and easy entry into play, in a sample of children ages 1-4. It is possible that complex play, often comprised of prosocial behaviors, enables the child, with practice, to learn which play entry strategies work best. This learning about the effectiveness of particular play entry strategies points to the development of social competence, in acquiring the aforementioned “success” in attaining social goals (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). As prosocial behavior, complex play, and socioemotional development feed into social competence, social competence seems to be an overarching, encompassing element of friendship and social network formation in the building of social capital.

**Social competence.** Social competence reflects successful social functioning with peers. Howes (1988) suggests that this implies that a child with high social competence is effective in his/her effect on peers and sensitive to social communication from peers, which can further imply their development of social interaction skills and friendships. This connection may be due to the relationship between peer interaction/play and social competence; peer interactions are opportunities for social competence development. Gagnon & Nagle (2004) used parent and teacher ratings of 4- and 5-year-old children’s peer interactions (level of interactivity in their play) and social competence (measured as socioemotional skills including emotion regulation) to determine a connection between play interaction and social competence. They found that those children who displayed high play interaction tended to have positive interpersonal relationships (friendships), high socioemotional skills, strong coping skills, and engaged in play and leisure activities at developmentally-appropriate levels.

Similarly, Vaughn et al. (2000) found that reciprocated friendships (relationships of mutual response/interaction/initiation) were associated with higher levels of social competence in
3- and 4-year-old children in a Head Start program. They used Q-sort observations of individual children’s interactions and behaviors to determine a social competence “score” by means of the criteria published by Waters et al. (1983, as cited by Vaughn et al., 2000). Whereas many studies tend to be conducted with white children from mid- to upper-income families (including the studies to be reviewed in the remainder of this paper), this study particularly stood out because it was conducted specifically with mostly black children from low-income families. The results supported the notion that young children’s friendships are formed in similar ways across socioeconomic differences. The authors note that their findings “are important because they highlight the breadth of the conceptual models proposed to explain friendship, social competence, and their interrelations, and because they highlight young children’s potential for resilience in the face of economic and social adversity” (p. 336). This is important to note for two reasons: 1) It counters Bourdieu’s ideas that only more socioeconomically-advantaged people have social capital and that children only passively receive it from their parents, and 2) It suggests the possibility that the rest of the studies on friendship formation in this paper may similarly apply to and be relevant for children across a broad range of demographic attributes.

Thus, there is a connection between reciprocal peer interaction/play and the development of social competence, and perhaps suggests how they may develop concurrently in young children. However, social competence is also related to the earlier and later development of other skills at other points in time. Blair et al. (2015) discovered that early emotion regulation predicts later social competence. They examined different dimensions of social competence derived from Hinde’s (1987) framework of social complexity: social skills (e.g., inviting others to join activities), peer group acceptance (how much child is liked by peers, measured as nominations for “best liked” by classmates), and friendship quality (as cited in Blair et al., 2015). The authors
found that higher levels of emotion regulation (ability to effectively manage emotions and respond to emotional situations in an appropriate way) at age 5 were associated with higher levels of social skills at age 7, and more positive friendship quality, peer acceptance, and emotion regulation at age 10. Thus, it appears that the development of emotion regulation can serve as a foundation for building the social competence and skills necessary to form higher quality, positive friendships.

Similarly, moral conduct and emotions may also be related to the later development of social competence and other skills needed to form positive friendships. Kochanska, Koenig, Barry, Kim, & Yoon (2010) discovered that toddler and preschool-aged children who have frequent engagement in moral conduct at school and home (exhibiting internal compliance with moral rules or norms) and moral emotions (e.g., empathy) incorporate these experiences into their self-view as good and moral. Children who at age 5 perceived themselves as moral or good were later rated at age 6 as highly competent and prosocial. This connection between morality and competence/prosociality suggests that children’s compliance with social norms (i.e., moral rules) supports the development of social competence and consequently their social networks of friendships.

Social competence can be related to other skills and features in ways that may seem less positive, but are still built around friendships. Hawley & Geldhof (2012) found that moral rule cognition (understanding of norms/rules) was related to elements of social competence in the form of social dominance—using prosocial, coercive, and aggressive strategies to acquire resources (e.g., toys)—in 4- and 5-year-old children. Social dominance is a feature that has been referred to as “an index of social competence” (Ostrov & Guzzo, 2015, p. 131). While social competence is usually viewed as a positive skill/feature, our earlier noted definition does not
specify the valence (positive/negative) of a goal—just that social competence refers to effectiveness in social interactions that is goal-oriented and allows child to be successful in attaining his/her goals (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Integrating Hawley & Geldhof’s (2012) definition of social dominance with Rose-Krasnor’s (1997) definition of social competence, social dominance refers to a child’s ability to attain his/her goal of acquiring more resources for him/herself. Thus, this integrated conceptualization of social dominance supports the notion that children’s ability to acquire resources for themselves (social dominance) is a component of social competence.

Though social dominance can still retain a negative connotation, it does not necessarily mean that children are without friends or social networks. Hawley & Geldhof (2012) also note the existence of “prosocial controllers”—children who are low on aggression, understand moral norms, internalize these norms, engage in prosocial behavior in ways that allow them to acquire a higher-than-average amount of resources (social dominance), and are well-liked by their peers. Notably, the authors also mention that these children “enjoy social capital” (p. 30). This is said very briefly in the description of “prosocial controllers” and is not further explained, but, interestingly enough, is the only article in the developmental psychology literature I reviewed here that mentions “social capital” at all. It suggests that while these children are able to acquire resources for themselves (a self-focused behavior), they do so by connecting with others (prosocial behavior) and are perhaps aware of their networks of relationships that afford them these resources (social capital). This is also in line with Coleman’s and Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social capital as a means for acquiring other capital, in this case—these young “prosocial controllers”’ social capital was a means for acquiring resources.
The notions that these children understand and internalize moral norms, develop social
dominance, and enjoy social capital, in addition to children’s general development of social
competence, suggests that they may be aware of their social relationships (friends), social goals,
and what they can acquire through these relationships. Rather than being loosely-tied, random
associations or interactions with peers, young children’s friendships may actually be quite
intentional, instrumental, and part of a network of social relationships that children are actively
creating.

**Children’s friendship networks: complex and intentional.** Thus far I have reviewed
and established how young children initiate and form friendships, and how social competence is
an integral part of forming friendships and the social network building blocks of social capital. It
may have seemed obvious that children form friendships through social interactions, but in order
to support the proposal that social capital is created by children, it may be helpful to demonstrate
children’s awareness of these social network structures and intentionality in their interactions
that form these friendships—as opposed to the idea of these relationships being random,
unintentional, fleeting associations. Just as Coleman (1988) proposes that social capital allows an
individual or group to pursue a particular action, exhibiting how children intentionally form
relationships with perhaps different goals (e.g., the social dominance goal of acquiring resources)
can better support the idea that these young children’s friendship formations are indeed the
building blocks of social capital. I will proceed here to demonstrate how young children form
stable, specific friendships within a complex network of relationships—relationships that they
intentionally form with an awareness of their different purposes/goals.

Children’s relationships with peers, particularly in the preschool classroom, are more
complex, structured, and intentional than what most of the history of research into children’s
social lives has revealed. Corsaro (1979, 1981, 1988, 1997, 2003), a sociologist, has pioneered much of the research in this area and has written extensively about young children’s “peer culture.” He explores how children produce their own peer culture as a way of dealing with new social demands of the preschool classroom—and how this preschool peer culture is marked by communal sharing and gaining social control as they construct their own social identities (Corsaro, 1988). For example, children initially may play to be very protective of play spaces and scenarios, not for the sake of being selfish, but in order to protect activities and reciprocal interactions with their peers that are already underway. There is a complex, concurrent struggle between communal sharing and social control. In this sense, Corsaro’s notion of peer culture may be similar to Putnam’s community-level conceptualization of social capital, but can still be viewed as Coleman’s individual-level conceptualization of social capital through strong friendships. As sharing is practiced, it becomes more clear as a foundation of their peer culture; the routines help them form their social identities and see themselves as members of a shared culture (Corsaro, 1988, p. 21). A level of stability that appears as the peer culture’s norms/routines are established and within this establishment of peer culture, friendships can be formed.

Developmental psychologists have similarly found concurrent stability and complexity in preschool children’s friendships. In a preschool classroom of children ages 2-6, Park et al. (2013) discovered many complex facets of children’s friendships and interactions through measuring their social orientation (level of social play and expressed positive affect) and peer competence (play entry skill, and levels of cooperative or reciprocal pretend play). They also found that stability increased in interaction patterns of positive social orientation (positive affect and prosocial behavior), cohesiveness (partners staying together), and use of control strategies...
(challenges or dares to initiate, direct, and maintain play) over a one-year period of time. This suggests that patterns of power and control develop and stabilize within particular relationships.

In a nursery school classroom of children ages 3-5 in France, Barbu (2003) similarly discovered that young children form a complex network of specific dyadic or triadic relationships that increase in stability over a one-year period of time. Over a year of almost daily one-hour observations of these children, Barbu (2003) discovered that children formed a complex network of strong and weak/temporary friendships and associations that increased in stability. She used sociograms (pictorial representations of children’s directed acts within and across time) to determine that child-directed behaviors to particular classmates occurred more frequently than expected by chance; children’s social behaviors were not randomly or evenly distributed among available classmates. This suggests that children’s interactions with specific classmates (friendships) are not randomly-selected associations, but that children instead are intentionally selective about their social investments in friendships. This is also supported by Barbu’s finding that the children’s social network became more structured over the course of the year with increasing clarity and selectivity in children’s social targets (friends) in dyads and triads. Their overall social activity increased over the year, but they interacted with fewer children (more social activity with fewer friends). Similarly, children lost and gained more play partners during the first half of the year than the second half of the year. Together, these pieces of information suggest that there is a great deal of complexity to children’s social networks and also an increase in the stability of young children’s friendships over time.

McElwain & Volling (2005) also discovered a level of complexity to young children’s social networks in how friend and sibling relationships interact. Through freeplay sessions of children ages 3-5 with a friend and separately with a sibling, they determined that children’s
interactions with a friend involved more complex social play and intense conflict than their interactions with a sibling. Aside from the differentiation between the types of interactions in these relationships, the authors combined this freeplay information with parent interviews to conclude that there is an interaction between friend and sibling relationships. Greater relationship quality with one partner actually buffered children from poor behavioral adjustment when the relationships quality with the other partner was poor or average. As opposed to operating as individual or isolated relationships, the impact that these relationships can have on each other suggests a dynamic network of influencing relationships. This study also points to another facet of children’s complex network of relationships—how they are differentiated in their function and intentionally pursued by children with these different functions in mind.

Even at a young age, children can differentiate amongst various people/relationships and what they can do in these relationships. Gleason (2002) found that 4-year-old children’s perceptions of their social relationships differ depending upon the person/role—parent, sibling, or friend. They mostly identified parents as a source of instrumental help and power, and preferred friendships for instrumental help and power over siblings. Other studies have investigated children’s selective or intentional interactions through exploration of friendships in inclusive classrooms. Diamond et al., (2000, 2008) noted the sensitivity of children ages 3-6 to the needs of others and strategies for helping others, particularly those with disabilities, in inclusive classrooms (more than those not in inclusive classrooms). They also discovered that preschool children understood that peers with physical disabilities would have more difficulty with activity requiring motor skills, and thus were significantly more likely to include a peer with a physical disability when the activity required minimal motor skills. This suggests that children
use social context, situational demands, and individual characteristics in making different decisions about who to play with.

Inherent in the concept of children’s friendships being differentiated (and not uniform, random associations) is the idea that children intentionally form these friendships and are aware of their different processes and functions. Ladd et al. (1996) found that 5-year-old children are aware of and can differentiate amongst various friendship processes and provisions (companionship, validation, aid, self-disclosure, conflict, and exclusivity). They also perceive differences in the quality of their friendships based on these relationship features. The authors propose that the pattern and direction of these correlations suggest that children’s perceptions of these friendship features are organized in a “reward-cost” model of relationships. For example,

When young children perceive their friends to be validating, they are also more likely to see them as helpful (i.e., offering aid), selective in their liking and association (i.e., exclusive toward their partners), and receptive to self-disclosure (i.e., someone with whom to share negative affect)…young children are more likely to feel satisfied and maintain friendships when they are able to maximize relationship ‘benefits’ and minimize relationship ‘costs.’ (p. 1114)

Within this reward-cost model, it is likely that a “benefit” could be social or instrumental provisions. This suggests that children form friendships intentionally with those who may help them acquire more benefits or other forms of capital—akin to Coleman’s and Bourdieu’s conceptualizations of social capital’s value in being converted to human and cultural capital. Correspondingly, I propose that they are intentionally creating their own social capital, while possibly considering how they can convert it into other forms of capital.
Coleman’s Social Capital Forms in Young Children’s Relationships

Children’s social capital is evident not only in the social networks of friendships that they are actively and intentionally developing, but also even more specifically: They are creating the three forms of social capital conceptualized by Coleman: effective norms, trust/reciprocity, and information channels. These three forms often overlap and interweave: Information channels can help communicate effective norms and build trust, while trust can be considered an effective norm, and reinforcing norms can help build trust that allows information channels to further open, etc. In the following sections, I attempt to disentangle some of these different forms for the sake of clearly expressing how children use and create them, while also mentioning their interconnectedness to portray the complexity of children’s social capital.

Effective norms: rules, routines and expectations. Effective norms are possibly the easiest form of Coleman’s social capital to see in young children’s interactions. Effective norms are rules or expectations of the culture and/or community that are followed and made “effective” by being reinforced by community members. This is quite evident in the class rules and also daily routines that are often foundational to preschool classrooms, and reinforced not only by teachers, but by children themselves (Erwin & Guintini, 2000; Madrid & Kantor, 2009). Corsaro (1988) also notes their importance to creating peer culture: “Only through repeated productions of routine elements of peer culture over the course of a year or more in a variety of preschool settings do children come to grasp the social identity of peer and see themselves as members of a shared culture” (p. 21).

Similarly, Erwin & Guintini (2000) discovered that child-generated routines were central to the development of community in an inclusive preschool classroom in New York City. Through a series of weekly observations over a period of 6 months, they discovered that children
created spontaneous routines that were recurring and often tied to a specific place or time as "shared effort by the children which enabled them to produce a collective identity among themselves" (Erwin & Guintini, 2000, p. 244). For example, every time the children entered an elevator together, they were so excited to be in a closed, tight quarters that they would look at each other, scream, and wave their arms up and down. Thus, it is not only classroom rules (e.g., say “please” and “thank you”) and teacher-led routines (e.g., circle time) that allow children to develop a social identity as a member of a group/community (or social network), but also the routines/rituals that children create themselves.

The awareness of being in a community of relationships and shared culture is perhaps what also motivates them to reinforce and reproduce these effective norms. Beyond rules and routines, effective norms can also include expectations—other behaviors that are expected to be reciprocated, including prosocial behavior and generosity. Barragan & Dweck (2014) discovered that setting up reciprocal interactions as the expectation or norm can encourage children to be similarly reciprocal in their interactions through generosity and helpfulness. When primed with brief reciprocal interactions (e.g., passing a ball back and forth), children ages 1-4 showed high degrees of altruism/generosity in later helping the researcher to reach an item (e.g., block, bottle) and donating significantly more stickers to the researcher who has left the room (preschool children only). Furthermore, this reciprocity also created an expectation of generosity in 4-year-olds. After brief reciprocal interactions, 4-year-old children expected the researcher to be more generous or helpful than another adult with whom they did not interact reciprocally.

Paulus (2016) found similar expectations of generosity in 3- to 5-year-old children. Children were first asked to share stickers with a couple of other children. After sharing, they were then told that they could ask one of these other children to share any amount of stickers
with them. Children were able to register and remember with whom they had initially shared the most stickers and then strategically asked this recipient to share with them. Paulus (2016) suggests that preschoolers have acquired expectations about others’ reciprocal behavior and act strategically according to these expectations—comparable to Barragan & Dweck’s (2014) discovery of 4-year-olds’ expectation of generosity or helpfulness from an adult after exercising a level of generosity (in the reciprocal interaction) with that adult. Together, findings from Barragan & Dweck (2014) & Paulus (2016) demonstrate that children pick up on the
expectations or norms of the context/setting, reproduce that expected/normal behavior, and then expect that same behavior in return. In other words, young children understand, follow, and reinforce effective norms.

Children’s understanding of effective norms is also evident in their pretend play scenarios. Madrid & Kantor (2009) conducted an ethnographic study of 20 children ages 3-5 in a preschool classroom over a period of 8 months to “explore how children, in their local peer cultures, negotiate and create their own local meanings about emotion” (p. 230). A specific tight-knit group of girls kept pretend playing a recurring “kitty” theme scenario, which revealed a great deal of what they had internalized of societal norms around gender roles. Through girls’ reminders to “do lady stuff…we have to act properly and not argue” (p. 239) and by constructing passive roles for girls to allow boys play entry in more active roles, children revealed their understanding that the norm for women’s roles was to “act properly” and be passive in relation to males:

Children understood that playing kitty or dog was not inherently a masculine or feminine position. It was the construction of these social identities within the peer culture which made being kitty female and a dog male. More importantly, by playing as kitties that
were trapped, lost and saved, the females were discursively positioning themselves within a traditional fairytale storyline in which the male hero role saves and/or rescues the passive female role. (p. 235)

The girl kittens allowed boys into their play scenarios by suddenly becoming trapped or lost and requesting help. At times the kittens even rejected the power boys (in the play scenario, dogs) gave them to escape and be free. In addition to reinforcing the norms of gender roles, the authors suggest that this may have also been an intentional construction and direction of the play narrative in order to allow play to continue. Thus, the following of an effective norm (form of social capital) allowed for a collective action or goal to be achieved (continuation of pretend play scenario).

Trust: built through effective norms and pretend play. Effective norms also help to build reciprocity and trust in the preschool classroom—as Coleman (1988) suggests that trust is created and bolstered by effective norms. In her exploration of how to distinguish between social skill and friendships at a young age, Howes (1996) noted the importance of complex play, namely pretend play, in how its “recognition of self/other reversibility and the social sensitivity needed for cooperative problem solving…makes it possible to infer the existence of a relationship from particular social interactions” (p. 75). Furthermore, Howes (1996) suggests that pretend play may serve as a type of intimate self-disclosure for young children. For example, a child who is afraid of the dark may pretend to be sleeping when a monster comes in order to self-disclose this fear to a partner because s/he trusts this partner and cannot clearly express this in conversation. Howes (1996) proposes that young children use fantasy to communicate information about themselves that they do not have cognitive and linguistic ability to
communicate through conversation; and accordingly, she suggests that an important function of social pretend play is exploration of intimacy and trust.

The trust that Howes suggests children explore in pretend play is perhaps in the emotional realm of maintaining confidentiality with one’s self-disclosure. However, trust manifests itself in other forms as well. Rotenberg, Michalik, Eisenberg, and Betts (2008) explored trustworthiness in children ages 4-6 across multiple bases and dimensions. Their conceptual model of trustworthiness was comprised of three fundamental bases of trustworthiness: 1) reliability – fulfillment of word/promise, 2) emotional – refraining from causing emotional harm, maintaining confidentiality, and 3) honesty – telling truth, being guided by genuine rather than malicious intent (Rotenberg, Boulton, & Fox, 2005; Rotenberg, MacDonald, & King, 2004; Rotenberg, McDougall, et al., 2004; as cited in Rotenberg et al., 2008). They assessed the reliability and emotional bases of trustworthiness by showing children pictures of their classmates and asking how often the pictured child kept secrets (emotional, maintaining confidentiality) and kept promises (reliability, fulfillment of word). The authors found that keeping secrets and keeping promises were substantially correlated, and that trustworthiness (as measured by average peer-rating of promise- and secret-keeping frequency) was associated with school adjustment. Because children are expected to fulfill promises made to peers and teachers, as well as maintain confidentiality of personal information during classroom activities in preschool, the authors suggest that these behaviors are engaged to promote preschool adjustment. Thus, as children follow preschool norms/expectations of trust, they build trust (and hence social capital) in ways that help them adjust or acclimate well to their school community.

**Information channels.** Coleman (1988) refers to information channels as the potential (that lives in relationships) to acquire useful information and facilitate individual or collective
action. It may seem obvious that children can be information channels in how they communicate with one another verbally. However, they can also use gestures or actions when they lack the linguistic sophistication to communicate their intended message, and their interactions as a whole can communicate meaningful information. In addition to exploring children’s self-disclosure and trust in pretend play, Howes (1988) also notes that symbolic behaviors in pretend play also allow children to generally communicate meaning or useful information in social interactions. Additionally, when playing with many different peers, children can acquire knowledge of different play styles and characteristic behaviors of peers that can allow for easy initiation and continuation of play (facilitating the collective action of play).

In a preschool classroom, children’s relationship networks can also be useful for acquiring information about class or peer-culture rules and routines. Madrid & Kantor (2009) noted how one child, within the kitty pretend play scenario, used scolding and sadness when one child hurt another during play. Scolding the perpetrator and labeling someone else’s sadness “allowed Mary to obtain her goal, which was to have group members share interpersonal accountability and maintain harmony within their peer-culture routine” (p. 244). Thus, Mary served as an information channel; her address to a real-life hurt within the context of the pretend play scenario allowed her to facilitate individual action of communicating the peer-culture rules of interpersonal accountability, as well as the collective actions of maintaining harmony and continuing the play scenario.

Non-verbal information channels were particularly useful and present in an inclusive classroom observed by Erwin & Guitini (2000). One specific example of this information channel in use is what the authors called “active assistance.” Some children were apt to provide “active assistance” to each other, without being asked to do so. For example, they recounted one
instance in which the class was singing “Going to Kentucky” during circle time. The activity involves children going around and around and then falling as it calls for in the song. One child did not seem to know to fall down. So another child, without being asked, got up, took this child’s hand and gently pulled him down. Through the information channel of active assistance, the rules of the activity were communicated in a way that facilitated an individual action of play in a group/collective game.

Young children also seek information channels intentionally and selectively from others. Kushnir, Vredenburgh, & Schneider (2013) discovered that causal actions may be a critical source of information for young children as they engage in causal learning. They found that after watching the successful and unsuccessful attempts of others to fix a toy and correctly label a new toy, 4-year-olds (and to a lesser extent, 3-year-olds) directed new requests for information to those who were successful at fixing or labeling. Specifically, they requested help with fixing a new toy from the one who they observed successfully fixing the first toy; and they requested the name of a new toy from the one who they observed correctly labeling the first toy. The authors suggest that successful causal actions (i.e., successfully fixing or correctly labeling the toy) “may also be an important source of information for social learning (about the causal abilities of particular people” (p. 449), thereby assisting them in their friendship formations and also allowing them to more effectively pursue an individual or collective goal, such as playing with or learning about a new toy.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Social capital facilitates individual and communal goals that build people’s interdependence within networks of relationships. Relationships amongst people within communities build trust and reciprocity amongst individuals, within families, schools, neighborhoods and institutions. A significant
amount of research has demonstrated that adults create social capital to various degrees through their interactions with the social networks that they create. More recent research has shown that children, too, create their own social capital while also facilitating the social capital development of their parents. Most of this research has focused on the years of adolescence and middle childhood. This paper has explored the possibilities that social capital actually emerges in the social lives of very young children. The relationships that they create with peers are not arbitrary associations and interactions, but are intentional, complex relationships that they build in deliberate social networks. Young children create their own social capital of trust, norms, and information channels through these intentional social networks.

Recognizing children’s development of their own social capital requires a perspective that acknowledges and values children as active social agents. The degree of social agency that young children have is particularly under-recognized. For this reason it was necessary to critically review a broad range of theory and research on children’s development with an appreciation of their agency and with the view that much of the past research may carry indications of the development of social capital in ways upon which the authors may not have focused. Most of the past research on social capital has been carried out by sociologists. This paper has attempted to merge the research from sociology with relevant theory and research from psychology.

In the final chapter of this study, I intentionally focused more on Coleman’s conceptualization of social capital as a possession of individuals and groups, existing in complex networks of intentional friendships. Future research ventures could focus more on Corsaro’s concept of preschool peer cultures and its equivalence to Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital as a community-level trait composed of weaker ties or associations that may not be as close or intentional as friendships, and young children’s role in this. In an effort to better understand the emergence of social capital, future research could also focus more on play entry strategies—which begin associations amongst young children. An additional concern that was not fully introduced or addressed by this paper is the issue of cultural and socioeconomic differences. Social capital may take different forms, be valued at different levels, and exist
at different levels, depending on the cultural and socioeconomic context of the community—especially as children’s agency similarly differs depending on these contextual factors.

Especially because the possession of social capital has been related to positive outcomes for children, including academic achievement and well-being, it would benefit us to learn how to best support their development of social capital. By acknowledging and understanding how the youngest children begin to actively develop their own social capital, we can bolster their development of social capital as early as possible. Just as preschool serves to prepare children for the academic challenges of formal schooling beginning with kindergarten, programs or other initiatives can be developed to prepare children for opportunities to develop their own social capital—opportunities that will likely expand immensely as they grow older, and as their independence and the sheer volume of people they encounter in life increase. An investment in understanding young children’s social capital would benefit their individual development and also the development of the communities in which they are growing and to which they are directly contributing.
References


