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Whence Connectedness, Hence Connectedness

Background Paper by

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Over the past few years, adolescent and school health journals have published an increasing number of studies that have documented significant correlations between a variable labeled *connectedness* and a range of indicators of adolescent health and development. The pattern of findings has been uniform, with *connectedness* positively associated with positive indicators of health and negatively associated with negative indicators of health. The general interpretation of these findings is that *connectedness* serves a protective function for adolescent health.

This paper provides a review of the *connectedness* variable with the intent of clarifying the parameters of the construct so that future work can maximize understanding it and its role in the healthy development of adolescents (and children of other ages). The paper focuses primarily on issues of conceptualization because much of the recent work has neither relied upon nor offered a clear or consistent understanding of what *connectedness* actually represents. In noting this limitation, the paper reviews relevant literatures from the social sciences that have extensively studied variables and constructs conceptually similar to *connectedness*, or of the many dimensions of it that are currently being studied. The paper reviews one recent program of research that has attended to many of the conceptual and empirical issues at stake when studying *connectedness*, and it concludes with recommendations on how research could proceed.

Different levels of abstraction

One of the challenges in the study of *connectedness* is the breadth with which different studies have considered it. Studies have variously assessed *connectedness* with

regard to connection to parents, to family generally, to peers, to school, and to communities. More broadly, studies have considered *connectedness* to youth as a collective and to “other people”, as well as “disconnectedness from society” (lack of connection to: school, work, military service, marriage, and connection to moral and spiritual meaning) (e.g., Whitlock, 2005).

Apart from the variability in the “partners” (e.g., individuals or institutions) to whom adolescents are connected, there are several other areas of complexity that plague the construct as it is being used currently. One key issue is the precise process or condition that *connectedness* is thought to measure. Studies have varied substantially on this point, describing or inferring that *connectedness* represents any one or more of the following: a measure of quality of a relationship, the degree of liking an environment or relationship, the quality of performance in an environment or relationship, the possession of feelings or attitude states, and a combination of states and the behaviors that antecede them. Moreover, although many of these studies cite as an original source, Grotevant and Cooper (1986), none of these characterizations are adequately consistent with these authors’ grounding conceptualization of *connectedness*.

Connectedness as a Property of a Relationship System

Grotevant and Cooper (1986) conceptualized *connectedness* as a property of a relationship system. It has, according to their work, two components: mutuality, or the “demonstration of sensitivity to and respect of the beliefs, feeling, and ideas of others” and permeability, or the “responsiveness or openness of an individual to the ideas of others”. *Connectedness* by this definition is a reciprocal, dynamic, property of a dyadic relationship. Byers et al. (2003) have approximated this definition of *connectedness* by

asserting that it describes close parent-adolescent relationships that are characterized by “mutual reciprocity, trust and dependency”. Not dissimilar is Sale et al.’s (2003) “family bonding, family communication. Lezin et al.’s (2004) view of *connectedness* is similar, although they interject an element of stability: “. . . quality of the emotional bond between parents (or those with a parenting role) and their children, and by the degree to which this bond is both mutually and sustained over time.”

Connectedness as Liking of or Performance in an Environment or Relationship

Quite apart from discussing or measuring *connectedness* as a relational property or quality, others have assessed it as the degree of the connected person’s liking of an environment or relationship. For example, Eisenberg et al. (2003) have measured the construct with items such as: “I like school . . .”. Performance in school was also assessed via an assessing the grades students received (Eisenberg et al., 2003).

Connectedness as the Possession of Feeling/Attitude States

Other work has preferred to characterize *connectedness* as an emotional or cognitive state. For example, Whitlock (2005) has reviewed work based on sociological (e.g., Durkheim, 1951; Bellah et al., 1996) or developmental psychology (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979, Lerner, 1991) theories that has defined *connectedness* as “sense of belonging and meaning”, “civic trust”, or a “sense of place, respect, and belonging.” Zelding and Topitzes (2002) have favored “sense of community” (e.g., “I feel connected to this neighborhood.”, “I feel at home in this neighborhood.”, while Chipuer et al. (2003) have defined *connectedness* as “community belongingness” (with yet a wide variety of sub-categories, e.g., “degree of support, friendships, activity, and safety”).

Connectedness as a Mix of States and Antecedent Behaviors

Many definitions invoke a mixture of states of being with specific behaviors that purportedly lead to these states. Thus, the lasting bond in Lezin et al.'s (2004) *connectedness* refers to the “day-to-day interactions . . . expressed freely as both parent and child move through their relationship together.” Similarly, Blum (2005) has characterized *connectedness* to parents and family as “feelings of closeness, satisfaction with family relationships, sense of being loved and cared for” and *connectedness* to school as “feel[ing] that teachers treat them fairly, feel close to people at school, and feel a part of school.” In line with this, McNeely et al. (2002) write of school *connectedness* as being comprised of both a state (“feel like a part of their school”) and its attendant behavior component (“feel cared for”). For Hendry and Reid (2000), “social connectedness” [with peers] represents both a content and a process.

Similarly, some invoke state-like conceptualizations of *connectedness*, but measure them primarily with the antecedent behaviors. Thus, for example, Allen et al. (1994) write of a “state of autonomous-relatedness” and measure it with the verbal communication (e.g., speech) that exhibits it. Piquart & Silbereisen (2002) write of *connectedness* between parents and children (trust, intimacy, closeness, etc.) and measure it with behavioral indicators (e.g., positive affect, receptiveness, negative affect, rejection). Many such studies ground their assessment of *connectedness* in the classic attachment notions of Bowlby (1969) who writes of attachment bonds being related to caregiving that recognizes and responds to a child’s need for comfort, security, and independent exploration (Kenny & Gallagher, 2002).

Analogues to *Connectedness*

To add to the mix, there are several constructs that researchers invoke when describing *connectedness*. However, like for the reference to the Grotevant and Cooper (1986), current definitions or, moreso, operationalizations, of *connectedness* are not entirely consistent with the labeling or conceptualization. For example, the term *attachment* is often used interchangeably with the term *connectedness*. However, at times, when it comes to actually defining attachment, descriptions are used that are not commonly invoked in the conceptualization or measurement of *connectedness*; e.g., Allen et al., (2002) describe *attachment* as “coherence of memories; preoccupation with, minimization of memories; overall coherence of discourse; objective valuing of attachment”.

When focusing on *connectedness* in the family, the *parental bond* is often used as a synonym. While in some cases (see above) this analogy seems sensible given how some researches measure *connectedness*, in other cases, the parental bond is defined with quite different indicators, such as identifying with the parent, viewing the parents as good role models, accepting parents as educators, valuing parents as friends and persons with whom they can communicate (e.g., van Wel et al., 2002). Still others write of *relational support* (e.g., “support family members perceive in dyadic family relationships”; Branje et al., 2002) or *relatedness* (e.g., “. . . feeling connected to others in one’s social milieu”; Asakawa & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In sum, the recent wave of research on *connectedness* is quite disparate in how it both defines, structures, and operationalizes the construct. The target or partner in the connection ranges broadly from individuals to institutions and the conceptual renderings of it vary between viewing *connectedness* as a dyadic, systemic property, liking or

performing in an institution, and/or possessing feelings or attitudes. Operationally, the measurement of these conceptualizations often include their supposed behavioral antecedents. Further, often analogue constructs are used interchangeably with *connectedness*, but are often defined with new or different sub-components or sub-constructs.

Refining the Research on *Connectedness*

Despite the disparity and inconsistency with which *connectedness* has been rendered and studied, two themes are evident that could be pursued to advance its study, in part because they both are consonant with much relevant existing literature that has been developed outside the specific domains of adolescent health. The first theme has to do with the consistent reference in the reviewed literatures to two basic elements of *connectedness*: a) a relational component, that is, the connection or bond that youth experience with socializing agents, and b) an autonomy component, that is, the degree to which youth feel that their individuality is validated or supported by their socialization agents. The second theme that emerges consistently in the literatures is a focus on the origins of *connectedness*, that is, the presumed or demonstrated behavioral antecedents of states of *connectedness*.

“*Relatedness and Autonomy*”

Many of the studies that intend to measure *connectedness* invoke the constructs of relatedness and autonomy, or constructs quite similar to them conceptually. Both this interpersonal connection to significant others (relatedness) and the experience of

individual autonomy are seen by many as so basic to human experience as to be characterized as fundamental “needs” of development (e.g., Asakawa & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Connell, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Grolnick, 2003; Harlow, 1958). Theoretical grounding for the relatedness aspect of connectedness is often located in attachment theory, most classically in the work of Bowlby (e.g., Bowlby, 1969) and Ainsworth (e.g., Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) which has emphasized the need for infants to experience security in their primary relationships. This security is seen by some to benefit children particularly by enhancing intrinsic motivation (e.g., Grolnick, 2003). Theoretical grounding for autonomy is often found in Self-Determination Theory (e.g., Grolnick, 2003; Ryan & Powelson, 1991) or similar conceptualizations that emphasize the drive and ability to fulfill personal wants (e.g., Neff & Harter, 2003; Selman, 1989; Stern, 1985).

While these elements of *connectedness* are commonly invoked, there is still room for much clarification of them. One concern, consistent with the review provided above, is the disparity in the level at which the label of *connectedness* is invoked. For example, while some conceptualizations appear to consider autonomy and relatedness as subcomponents of the broader construct of *connectedness* (e.g., Allen et al., 1994), others employ the term *connectedness* at the sub-component level (e.g., Neff & Harter’s “autonomy, connectedness, mutuality). This latter approach is consistent with another that has employed the term “connection” to refer, similarly, to the interpersonal bonding, attachment or relatedness component of positive social relationships (e.g., Barber, 1997a, 1997b; Barber & Olson, 1997; Barber et al., 2005).

Aside from these labeling disparities, the study of these central components of social relationships is otherwise substantively complex. That is, the juxtaposition of autonomy and relatedness is controversial. In classic psychoanalytic writings, and elsewhere, for example, these two core conditions of social experience have been considered opposing (see, e.g., Byers et al., 2003; Chodorow, 1989; Gilligan, 1982, 1988). While still considering them as separate conditions, others prefer to view them as mutually supportive and not exclusive (e.g., Cooper et al., 1983; Deci & Ryan, 1995) (Neff & Harter, 2003). Still others contemplate that the two conditions interact with each other (contingent upon each other) (e.g., Allen et al., 1994; Grolnick, 2003).

Further complexity is found in assessing the conditions under which relatedness and/or autonomy might be experienced. Specifically, Neff and Harter (2003), for example, suggest that the experience and/or the balance of the two conditions might well depend on circumstances of power in relationships. They note that people use different (power-related) styles (e.g., excess autonomy, excess connectedness, or excess mutuality) across different relationship contexts. Similarly, Branje et al. (2004) recommend sensitivity to whether the (family) relationships in question are vertical or horizontal.

Origins of *Connectedness*

Quite apart from assessing what *connectedness* actually is in terms of its components (or whether the term *connectedness* is itself best used as an omnibus label or as a label for a component of positive social relationships, for example), the recent work on *connectedness* regularly invokes, either explicitly or implicitly, attention to the origins of the condition of being connected. More specifically, studies frequently refer to the behaviors that others (e.g., parents, teachers, etc.) engage in that are suspected to be

causally related to the creation of the connection. Thus, for example, in Lezin et al.'s (2002) elaborated definition of *connectedness*, they write that parents “foster” or “provide”: “a climate of trust” that includes physical and emotional support, etc.; “communication” that signals affection and warmth; “appropriate structure” as in discipline, monitoring, etc.; “shared time together”, involving guidance and support, etc.

Often those studying attachment or autonomy/relatedness, some measure these by way of parental behaviors that either exhibit them or appear to be linked to them (e.g., parental speech patterns exhibiting autonomy/relatedness; Allen et al., 1994; Allen et al., 2002). Along this line, while noting that parent-child relations are surely reciprocal, Seginar et al. (2004) emphasize the importance, nevertheless, to examine the effects of parents.

Connection, Regulation, and Respect for Individuality

One current research project serves as an illustration of how several of the issues of concern raised here about the study of *connectedness* can be addressed. The Cross-National Adolescence Project (C-NAP; Barber et al., 2005), a large-scale, adolescent reported study has focused explicitly on identifying central dimensions of parenting. It drew from the extensive parent-child socialization literatures in developmental psychology and sociology in formulating and testing a framework of how specific dimensions of parenting might be uniquely related to discrete forms of adolescent psychosocial functioning.

As background, since the 1960s social science researchers have continually identified three basic dimensions of parenting. While somewhat varying labels have been used, recent summaries have employed the terms parental support (warm, nurturant,

companionate parental behavior toward children), behavioral control (the establishment and enforcement of reasonable rules for child behavior), and psychological control (intrusive, manipulative parenting behaviors) (see Barber et al., 2005 for a summary of this research). As one means of advancing research on that well-established set of parenting dimensions, it was hypothesized in the C-NAP that the three dimensions would be differentially related to specific aspects of youth functioning: namely, that parental support would predict social competence, that adequate behavioral control would predict conformity (low antisocial behavior), and that parental psychological control would predict internalized dysfunction (e.g., depression).

In the C-NAP, this multivariate framework of adolescent socialization was tested thoroughly across sex, age, social class, and religious affiliation. It was tested with multiple statistical procedures cross-sectionally and longitudinally across three waves of data in a sample of 900 U.S. adolescents, and cross-sectionally on samples of several hundred adolescents in each of 10 other nations or ethnic groups within nations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and South America.

In all samples, perceived parental supportive behavior was most strongly related to adolescent social initiative (adolescents initiating social interaction with peers and adults outside the home) and also related to lower levels of depression. Further, in four of the 11 sites, parental support was also related to lower levels of antisocial behavior (e.g., substance use, vandalism, truancy, etc.). Parental behavioral control (knowledge/monitoring of adolescent out-of-home activities) was uniquely related to lower levels of antisocial behavior. Parental psychological control was related to both higher levels of depression and higher levels of antisocial behavior.

In essence, the dimensions of perceived parenting were related to youth outcomes in precisely the same way across the samples. This commonality of the findings across age, sex, time, and culture suggests that the tested framework (distilled from several decades of past work by scores of scholars, using constructs that have been validated using multiple methodologies [e.g., youth report, parent report, observation, etc.]) is tapping rather basic dynamics of parent-adolescent relationships. The fundamental salience of these socializing behaviors, as evidenced by many decades of validating research, and, now, via the C-NAP shown to have broad relevance across very diverse cultures, lead to the proposition that these variables - parental support, behavioral control, and psychological control - are actually the parent-child level analogues to much broader conditions of promotive conditions that socializing agents or institutions can provide children and adolescents; namely, *connection, regulation, and respect for individuality*.

Barber et al. (2005) defined *connection* as “a tie between the child and significant other persons (groups or institutions) that provides a sense of belonging, an absence of aloneness, a perceived bond. Depending on the intimacy of the context, this connection is produced by different levels, degrees or combinations of consistent, positive, predictable, loving, supportive, devoted, and/or affectionate interaction”. The label *connection* was preferred over other conceptually similar labels because it effectively communicates the essence of the social condition, or state of being connected, but in a less detached way than the label *relatedness*; without some of the complicating connotations that accompany the label *attachment* (e.g., the concerns in the attachment conceptualizations about critical time periods, multiple attachment types, many of which are negative, etc.);

or, as discussed in detail above, without the ambiguity of current renderings of *connectedness*.

Regulation was defined as “a condition or state that reflects the establishment of appropriate structure around the child’s behavior . . . [that, implies] a management role for the socializer(s) – e.g., adjust, adapt, organize, supervise, etc.” Barber et al. (2005) preferred the term *regulation* to *control* because the latter too easily connotes a unidirectional assertion of power, and to *structure* that, alone, seems too static.

Respect for Individuality was defined as “acknowledging and respecting a child’s independent self by avoiding behaviors that intrude, exploit, or manipulate it”. This construct differs importantly from the other two in that achieving the facilitative social condition or state results from avoiding behaviors rather than enacting them. The temptation with this construct is to merge this avoidance of intrusion into the child’s psychological autonomy with other constructs like “autonomy granting” or “autonomy support” that are the subject of so much other research (e.g., see above). This does not appear to be warranted, however, at either theoretical or empirical levels. Empirically, relying on the now large literature on psychological control (see e.g., Barber, 2002), the findings clearly indicate that exposure to intrusive behaviors is associated with negative outcomes in children and adolescents. They say nothing, however, about the effects of explicitly granting or supporting autonomy. Much work has shown that explicitly granting or supporting is positively related to child and adolescent functioning (e.g., Eccles et al., 1997; Grolnick, 2003; Silk et al., 2003), but, importantly, those effects are difficult to distinguish from those of parental support. To presume that the lack of explicit support of autonomy is the explanation for the negative effects of psychological control is

not only unjustified empirically, but, theoretically, it would unduly privilege explicit behaviors enacted towards a child as promoting development. The data on the effects of psychological control when correctly interpreted indicate, on the contrary, that at least some parts of self-development are protected through honoring it by not intruding upon it.

Barber et al. (2005) noted several advantages to shifting the level of conceptualization from the widely studied parenting variables to these broader constructs of facilitating conditions of socialization. First, it helps separate out the issue of causality. By focusing on parental behaviors per se researchers imply a direction of effect from parent to child. No such confound of causality is implied by focusing instead on achieved conditions of the parent-child relationship. Second, shifting to the broader conceptualizations helps avoid another potentially serious mis-attribution of responsibility for the achieved effect. By focusing on behaviors or styles of certain socializers (e.g., parents), we naturally conclude that it is something about these socializers (i.e., the source) - as opposed to what is experienced in interaction with them (i.e., the commodity) - that is responsible for the achieved effect. By shifting to a focus on the achieved state of being appropriately regulated, for example, we can speak of and recommend that healthy development is facilitated by experiencing appropriate *regulation*, leaving open the possibility and likelihood that it can occur in multiple social environments (e.g., peers, school, community, religious institutions, etc) as well as in different context- or age-specific ways.

Broadening the conceptualization of these socialization processes to accommodate multiple domains allows for an assessment of the relative contribution of

these multiple contexts to a child's development. Some work, for example (e.g., Barber & Olsen, 1997; Eccles et al., 1997; Herman et al., 1997; Sampson, 1997; Stolz et al., 2004), demonstrates that these three socialization conditions can be provided by multiple social contexts (e.g, schools, neighborhoods, peers, in addition to the family context) and that these experiences in these varied contexts are relevant to child (adolescent) functioning. Assessing the same conditions in multiple contexts allows for the investigation of interesting questions, as examples: about the adequacy of discrete social contexts in facilitating key socialization conditions (e.g., "Is the family context more relevant than the school context?"); about the salience of key experiences in different contexts for distinct aspects of child development (e.g., "Does connection, wherever it is achieved, facilitate social competence particularly more so than it does mental health?"); and about potential joint effects of multiple contexts (e.g., additive, interactive, or compensatory effects, etc.).

A third advantage of conceptualizing at this broader level of achieved socialization conditions is that it allows for sensitivity to potential cultural variations in the socialization process. The specific ways in which these conditions are met may vary meaningfully by culture. Focusing, therefore, on general conditions of socialization allows comparative research to proceed with less risk of ignoring cultural differences.

Finally, concentrating on a limited, well-documented set of principles of socialization simplifies the translation of research findings into practical application. Rather than challenging and perhaps confusing parents (or teachers, and others) to comprehend and assimilate a broad array of specific behaviors that often occur in complex configurations, it seems more effective to be able to communicate that there are

a small number of basic conditions parents (and other socializers) should attempt to facilitate in their relationships with their children. This parsimony would also be quite useful for intervention agents for whom time, space, or financial constraints do not permit elaborate assessments or training frameworks.

Discussion

The increasing accumulation of studies in adolescent and school health journals on *connectedness* demonstrates a welcome recognition of and appreciation for the value to children and adolescents of their social experiences with individuals and with institutions. The solid consistency of the findings that these connections are positively related to a variety of indices of health and development meaningfully endorses this attention and recommends continued efforts to expand the work. In order to be most expedient and fruitful, that expansion could focus fundamentally on issues of conceptualization and the attendant measurement concerns.

First, the term *connectedness* itself is problematic. That term has a familiar history in child development literatures and the current renderings of it are not often consistent with its grounding conceptualization as a dyadic, systemic property of relationships. Rather the term is being used now to cover a wide gamut of more or less related aspects of an individual's social experiences – ranging from perceptions of relationship quality to satisfaction with institutions, to feelings of belongingness. That spectrum of an individual's social experience is so wide-ranging that, when taken as a whole, the emerging literatures on *connectedness* could well be interpreted to be assessing a phenomenon as general as the quality of an individual's social experience – measured, as it can be, and is, in many different ways and at different levels.

At the very least, if the term *connectedness* is to be used, then authors need to very clearly define what is meant by it. This is more than merely a “truth-in-labeling” issue. It could well be, for example, that some of the different aspects of social relationship quality that are being studied under the rubric of *connectedness* have differing effects on child and adolescent development – whether those differences be in the relative salience to development of the dimensions or in the specificity of effects, i.e., which aspects of development they are most facilitative. If so, to lump them together under a common label would prevent the detection of those differences.

Better would be to conduct a careful conceptual mapping of the levels and domains thought to be part of the broader umbrella of facilitative social experiences, particularly because there are already extensive literatures throughout social science that speak directly to most of the elements of social experience that are being studied in the *connectedness* literatures. In other words, there is both enough complexity to the phenomena being studied and enough existing information related to it to justify much more precision in labeling, conceptualization, and measurement. But one example of this is Barber’s (Barber et al., 2005) suggestion to think generally in terms of a limited, well-documented set of facilitating conditions of socialization that are conceptualized broadly enough to allow for complexity to be accommodated and precision to be facilitated, while at the same time being basic enough to facilitate incorporation into policy and programming endeavors multiculturally.

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