ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Growing up in rural community - children's experiences of social capital from perspectives of wellbeing

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: People are influenced by the neighborhood in which they live. The neighborhood may be particularly important for children's wellbeing because of the constraints it imposes on their patterns of daily activities. Furthermore, the neighborhood is a central context for social development, being a place where children form networks and learn social skills and values. The aim of this study was to describe how social capital in the neighborhood is perceived by children living in rural areas, and to reveal what this adds to their sense of wellbeing.

Methods: The study had a descriptive research design with a qualitative approach. Seven single-sex focus group interviews were conducted with children the in 6th grade (aged 11–12 years). Data were analyzed using deductive content analysis.

Results: The children perceived a lack of social capital due to environmental and social constraints in their everyday lives. However, their wellbeing was enhanced by strong cohesion in the neighborhood. In addition, settings such as the school, the natural environment, and sporting associations were highly valued and emerged as crucial factors for enhancing the children's wellbeing. The spatial isolation that characterizes rural areas created a special context of social network structures, cohesion and trust, but was also a breeding ground for exclusion and social control. The stories revealed paradoxical feelings of living in a good and safe area that simultaneously felt isolated and restricted.

Conclusions: From a rural perspective, this study reveals the complexity of the children's perceptions of their social environment, and the ways in which these perceptions have both positive and negative effects on wellbeing. The results highlight how important

it is for health professionals in rural areas to consider the complex influence of bonding social capital on children's wellbeing, and to be aware that it can promote exclusion as well as cohesion.

Key words: child wellbeing, health determinant, health promotion, social capital, social environment, Sweden.

Introduction

People are influenced by the neighborhood in which they live. The neighborhood may be particularly important for children's wellbeing because of the constraints it imposes on their patterns of daily activities[1]. Furthermore, the neighborhood is a central context for social development, being a place where children form networks and learn social skills and values[2]. Health promotion experts have become increasingly aware of the social environment within neighborhoods, the ways in which individuals relate to wider social networks and communities, and the important effects these factors have on health and wellbeing[3]. When attempting to capture children's experiences of their social environment from the viewpoint of wellbeing, the concept of social capital may serve as a useful framework[4]. Social capital in the context of social life is characterized by the extent of membership in formal and informal social networks, norms of reciprocity and trust, and facilitating mutual cooperation in resources or benefits. Interpersonal trust is an indicative consequence of social capital[5]. It can be divided into 'thick trust' which is established in close, personal relations, and 'thin trust' which is embedded in people in general who are not personally known[5,6].

Individual and community investment in social networks and associational relationships generate social capital in the form of resources that individuals can utilize to promote self-growth and opportunity. Social capital is 'of' the people and 'for' the people and is fundamental to community networks based on reciprocal relations, where individual responsibility shifts toward that of collective responsibility[5].

For the purposes of this study, it is relevant to distinguish between the bonding and bridging dimensions of social capital. This distinction has shown to be significant in the study of health and wellbeing[7,8], and is also relevant in studies which take a rural perspective[4]. Bonding social capital is generated out of relationships and social networks between similar persons (ie neighbors and family)[9]. The networks are inward-looking and characterized by dense, loyal ties, and strong but localized trust. The networks can be an important source of social support but may be exclusionary towards non-members of the network[5,7]. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, operates between dissimilar persons at the same level of social hierarchy. The bonds between the members are rather weak, but the networks are characterized by solidarity and a mutual respect for different social positions within society.

The introduction of social capital as a determinant of health has not been uncomplicated, and the research has been criticized on various conceptual and methodological grounds. The first and most prominent critique is directed towards the multidimensional and inconsistent definition of the concept, which has created confusion over how to operationalize and measure it empirically. This confusion leads to contradictory and non-consistent results, which in turn creates questions about both the meaning of the concept and its relevance to different health outcomes[10]. However, the concept of social capital is useful in the study of social processes and experiences because it has the potential to incorporate the influence of neighborhood social factors on an individual's wellbeing.

Second, there has been criticism concerning the concept's relevance for children. Putnam did not incorporate children in his notion of social capital, and so studies exploring social capital in child research have neglected children's agency and overstated the influence of parents on children's lives[11]. Family background and the home environment are obviously

important to children's wellbeing, but it is also important to take into account the broader social environment, including relationships and contexts beyond the family and household such as the school and the neighborhood.

Several quantitative studies have established a relationship between neighborhood social capital and child wellbeing[12-19]. As mentioned, social capital has been defined and operationalized in a number of different ways, which has led to rather disparate results. Thus, no clear conclusions can be drawn from this empirical work. Against this background, it seems reasonable to believe that qualitative methods could be useful in more thoroughly exploring the elements of social capital from the perspective of children's wellbeing. To date, qualitative contributions to this area have been few[2,8,20,21]. However, Morrow has pointed out that from an urban perspective it is not only social networks in the neighborhood that can affect children's wellbeing; specific places such as the school and green areas/playgrounds are important too[2].

Most research on neighborhood social capital and health has been carried out in urban contexts[22]. However, among an adult population, empirical evidence shows that some factors relating to social capital are more prominent in urban areas, for example tolerance of diversity, while others such as trust and safety, participation in the local community, and neighborhood connections, are more salient in rural contexts. In general, rural people perceive higher levels of social capital than their urban counterparts[4]. Studies exploring young people's experience of living in a rural neighborhood report that long distances, along with lack of transportation and leisure facilities, lead to limited social opportunities and further to truancy, alcohol-drinking, and other health problems[20,23,24].

In summary, the major part of the literature on social capital and child health has a quantitative approach focusing on the urban perspective; moreover, there are a number of different theoretical approaches and operationalizations of the framework of social capital. The aim of the present study was to address the less well explored aspects of this field, by

describing how social capital in the neighborhood is perceived by children living in rural areas, and revealing what this adds to their sense of wellbeing.

Methods

Design and sample

A descriptive research design with a qualitative approach was used, in order to provide a deeper understanding of different social processes in the community[25]. Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling. The inclusion criteria were: (i) boys and girls aged 11-12 years; and (ii) those with experience of growing up in a rural area. Thus, participants were recruited from two schools in two different rural municipalities in the interior parts of northern Sweden with a population density of approximately one person per km^2. The municipalities were selected using the criteria for the Swedish definition of rural municipalities: a population density of less than 7 people per km^2, and a total population of no more than 20 000 individuals. The total population in the selected municipalities were approximately 7400 and 10 300, respectively. The average total income among the inhabitants in the municipalities was lower than the average for the whole country. Of the inhabitants aged 25-64 years, 18-21% had a three-year senior high school education (national average 19%), and 12-16% had a three-year university education (national average 22%)[26]. The inhabitants of the municipalities were mostly Swedish-born (approximately 95%). The participants lived in villages and hamlets that consisted of between one and approximately 100 households. The distances from the villages where the schools were located to the nearest town (with approximately 30 000 inhabitants) were 40 and 60 km, respectively. The services available in the villages included schools, health and child care centers, grocery stores, libraries, and sports grounds. Most participants had lived their entire lives in the area, and at the time of the study were living in traditional nuclear families in villas or on farms. Some lived on family estates with three generations living on the same farm. Some participants lived in the villages where the schools were

located but several traveled up to 20 km to school from the surrounding areas.

The principals of the schools were contacted by the first author and given information about the study. After approval by the principals, the 6th grade homeroom teachers were contacted and a meeting with the pupils was arranged. All children (18 in one school and 19 in the other) received verbal and written information about the study. This purposeful sampling process yielded a sample of 28 children. The homeroom teachers created 7 single-sex groups, each consisting of three to five children (Table 1).

Interviews

Focus group interviews are a suitable method for data collection because they provide a natural environment where experiences and opinions are constructed, modified, and redefined in the groups' dynamics. Focus group interviews with children also provide a safe and more natural peer environment than individual interviews, thus redressing the power imbalance between adult and child[27,28]. Focus group interviews were conducted following an interview guide that included open-ended questions about the children's perceptions of the social environment, with reference to the neighborhood and to the school. The discussions also focused on how these social features could be seen and understood from a wellbeing perspective. The first focus group interview of four girls served as a pilot interview, aimed at testing and refining the questions in the interview guide. The pilot interview was included in the final sample because only minor changes were made to the wording of the questions. The interviews were tape-recorded and conducted in a separate room in the school by a moderator (first author) and an assistant moderator (third author). The latter made notes, managed technical equipment and gave an oral summary at the end of each session. The interviews allowed participants to interact, comment on, and share information, and included the opportunity for probing and clarifying the answers given[29]. Each interview lasted between 50 and 120 min (average 84 min).

Data analysis

A deductive content analysis was applied to the interview text[30,31]. After transcription, the first author read the excerpts several times in order to become familiar with the text. A categorization scheme was developed, identifying key concepts derived from theories of social capital (ie community attachment, social networks, community participation and trust). The next step consisted of highlighting of meaning units (words, sentences or paragraphs) focusing on perceptions of social capital in relation to wellbeing. The meaning units were labeled with codes. The codes were compared for similarities and differences, and then sorted into the scheme of categories and subcategories based on their similarities. All authors were involved in the various stages of the analysis.

Ethical considerations

The participants were assured that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. They gave their assent, and were guaranteed confidential treatment of the narratives. Parents of the children interested in participating received written information about the nature of the research and were asked for written permission for their child to take part. The Research Ethics Committee of Mid Sweden University reviewed the study and raised no ethical objections.

Results

The findings are presented in four categories; each category is described by subcategories and illustrated with quotations from the interviews. An overview of categories and subcategories is presented (Table 2).

Table 1: Profile of focus groups

Focus group	Focus group characteristic			
	Sex	**Interview length (min)**	**N**	**School**
A[†]	Girls	73	4	1
B	Girls	121	5	2
C	Boys	97(71+26)[¶]	4, 3	2
D	Girls	71	4	1
E	Boys	51	3	1
F	Boys	88	3	2
G	Girls	86	5	2

†Pilot interview; ¶Session in 2 parts: the first (71 min; 4 children) was interrupted and recommenced on another day with only 3 of 4 participants (for 26 min).

Table 2: Categories and subcategories

Category	Subcategory
Community attachment	Sense of community Sense of school Sense of belonging
Community participation	Participation in associations Participation in local activities
Social networks	Friends Family and wider kin Neighbours
Trust	Thick trust Thin trust

Community attachment

Sense of community: The children described their community in both positive and negative terms. In environmental terms, the rural community was described as a good place to grow up in. Living close to nature generated feelings of freedom and tranquility which seemed to be important to the children's wellbeing. Nature played a significant role in these children's lives; its accessibility was clear in the children's choice of leisure activities, which were mainly performed outdoors, such as bicycling, skiing, horse riding, or fishing. The outdoor environment was described as safe and secure because road traffic was neither disruptive nor heavy.

Negative aspects of living in rural areas were also mentioned. The neighborhood was described as deserted, boring, and far away from everything. It was tedious to live in an area with few people and long distances to social activities and friends. The children mentioned a lack of and wish for natural meeting places where they could socialize and play, such as soccer fields.

One focus group discussed how social control in the local community could lead to children not having the opportunity to choose their own friends. The children felt that they were urged to make friends with all the children in the village, even if they did not have anything in common.

> Hannah: *It's like you have to be friends with everyone that's about the same age as you are. It's kind of like*

you're forced to be friends with everybody. But it is. So if you, like, were having a party or whatever, and then you invite your friends. Then it's like everyone else will be mad at you 'cause they can't come if you don't invite them, even though you're not even friends with them. But, you know, even if there's someone who is like two years younger who lives next door, it's not certain you're friends with them.

Sense of school: The school formed an important community in itself. While the most obvious function of the school is education, it is also a setting for social interaction as children meet friends and classmates and get to know new people, and this function is crucial for the wellbeing of children. The participants in the focus groups made it clear that going to a small school with only a few pupils resulted in tight, bonding networks. However, the discussions also revealed the downsides of these bonding networks as the children described experiences of exclusion and being left out. The small size of the schools led to limited possibilities to choose friends and, in some cases, the children described having to be friends with people they did not actually like.

Hannah: *But you know, since there were so few kids I think that they should close down these small schools, and make bigger schools, 'cause I think it's kind of weird there being only a few kids if you don't have a real friend. You kind of have to be with everyone, like children three years younger than you who you don't even like. I don't think that's so good.*

Moderator: *Why not?*

Hannah: *If you don't have a friend, no one that you can really trust and that, and well, even if it's a small school then someone will be left out. And it was really weird last year. 'Cause it was, like, all the girls stuck together.*

Moderator: *In the whole school?*

Hannah: *Yes, there weren't many. . . And then some of them started shutting people out.*

There were varying perceptions of how new pupils were welcomed into the class. In most cases, there were no problems with new pupils arriving in the class. However, some of the focus groups revealed stories about cultural clashes and problems such as disorder and changes in network structures. It seemed that it was sometimes hard for a newcomer to be included and accepted in the new class.

Moderator: *If a new student joins the school, how do you usually treat them?*

Hannah: *It's like, we've only had one new kid in our class. Ummm… And that was like a cultural clash. She was from the big city. And, like, everyone else has always lived here.*

Social control was another topic discussed in relation to school. Situations in school were often handled on the basis of hierarchy and power: for example, one girl mentioned how older pupils 'kind of rule over everyone'. Further, graffiti and property damage were common problems, and intervening in such situations could be frightening, depending on one's age and degree of respect for the 'troublemakers'. Reporting these problems to a teacher could be perceived as 'sneaking', and there was always the risk that the perpetrator might take revenge.

Sense of belonging: Besides a strong sense of belonging to their individual homes, the children also described a sense of belonging to the local community: the village or hamlet, the school, or the natural environment. This sense of belonging was derived not only from places, but also from relationships and people. The children also described a sense of belonging when they spent time with their pets, such as horses or dogs. A sense of belonging could also arise from 'hanging out' with someone who was similar to you, and who shared the same values. It was seen as important to belong somewhere and to know that you always had somewhere to go.

Moderator: *So, you belong where you live?*

All: *Yes.*

Anna: *At our house.*

Moderator: *OK. Can you belong somewhere else?*

Jessica: *With your best friend.*

Anna: *Well, if you're with a relative, then you feel like you belong too. If you're with someone that you like a lot.*

Community participation

articipation in associations: The children were involved in different associations. Being a member of an association enhanced wellbeing in many ways because it offered possibilities for meeting friends, playing sports, and sharing special interests. However, due to the rural context, these bridging networks were sometimes restricted. Living in a rural area implied long distances to travel for training sessions, and this was described as bothersome. One girl stated that she had had to give up one of her activities because travelling the long distances had become too laborious and time-consuming. Conversely, some groups or associations had been forced to discontinue their activities due to a lack of members. The children had a limited selection of activities available to them; several sports were not feasible in the local community. They felt it would have been better to live in a town where training facilities were within easy reach.

Isac: *We have a long way to drive to practices.*

John: *Yes.*

Isac: *It's better if you live in a bigger town, then the hockey arena and soccer fields are nearby. We do have soccer fields here but no hockey rink. For that we have to go to another village. It's like 30 kilometers away or something like that.*

Participation in local activities: The children attended various local activities at places such as the youth recreation centre, the public swimming pool, the library, and the church. These places constituted a major part of their leisure

time and were important for social interaction. In order to promote the spirit of community and communion, village festivals and regional fairs were organized locally and often included special activities for children.

Moderator*: Do you have village festivals and events like that where you live?*

Anna: *Yes.*

Julia: *Not really village festivals, but you can kind of celebrate new year and things like that in the village hall. So everyone who lives nearby can go there.*

Social networks

Friends: Friends were fundamental in the children's social networks. However, opportunities to 'hang out' with and choose one's friends were limited. Developing social networks could be tricky, and some children mentioned a lack of friends of the same age in the local community. Distance was another reason for the children not being able to spend time with friends; seeing friends out of school time required planning, and the involvement of parents for transportation.

Jessica*: It's kind of tough to live here, 'cause you have a friend over in another village and then you have 20 kilometers to go there …so your parents have to be home and drive you.*

The children wished their friends lived closer. However, they found alternative ways of keeping in touch with friends. Text messaging, email, chat programs, and webcams were considered useful tools although personal meetings were preferred.

Family and wider kin: Family and relatives were vital resources for children's wellbeing, not least because they supplied both social and practical support. Siblings were also described as significant because growing up in a rural area meant that opportunities to see friends could be limited. The

practical support of the family was reciprocal; the children described how parents and relatives helped them in different ways, for example by driving them to see their friends and to their activities, but also how *they* assisted their parents by babysitting younger siblings, shoveling snow, or cooking. The importance of emotional support from family and relatives was also highlighted in the discussions. Feelings of security were engendered by having someone in the family to talk to and rely on, and who would always understand.

Moderator*: Why is it important to have your family around?*

Olivia*: Well, I think it's safer having lots of people [around]… If something happened, you could always go to them.*

Moderator: *You always have someone to go to?*

Olivia*: Yes.*

Neighbors: The children described a strong sense of cohesion among people in the local community. Neighbors were important, and constituted another source of reciprocal practical and emotional support and security. The children felt secure knowing that they could always turn to their neighbors if they needed help. Close, reciprocal relationships with the neighbors were described, for example, as when people lend bits and pieces to each other, or help out with babysitting or farm work.

Moderator: *You mentioned neighbors. In what way are they important?*

William: *Well, if you need help with something, you can just go round and ask them.*

Samuel: *Yes, like when you're home alone, and something goes wrong, and you can't reach your parents, then you can go to your neighbors…*

William: *I'd go there and ask if I can borrow something, if I'm home alone or something like that.*

Samuel: *Yeah, if I don't have something at home, then that's what I do, I go and ask if I can borrow it from them. Nice neighbors – that's really important.*

However, neighbors could also exercise social control, which was not described in positive terms. They might 'nag' or 'moan' or tell the children's parents when they had been up to some mischief or done something undesirable.

Trust

Thick trust: The notion of trust also came up during the discussions. Being trustworthy meant being able to keep a secret, telling the truth, and being able to be close to and confide in someone. There was a clear consensus that you could trust people you knew well, such as family members, friends, and neighbors; but also that you could also trust some people even if you did not see them very often.

Lisa: *I can trust Angela and Sophie 'cause we've known each other since we were really young. And we've been best friends almost all our lives. So. . . You could say that they're almost like my siblings.*

Thin trust: There was less consensus over whether people in general, not personally known to you, could be trusted. Some children said that most people could be trusted, even if they did not personally know them. Other children said that a relative not personally known to them could be trusted but not a stranger.

Moderator*: Do you feel you can trust people here at school, for example, or out in the village?*

Molly: *Maybe not complete strangers, but you might trust your neighbor, if you knew them.*

Jennifer: *Well, I wouldn't go up to a stranger and say: 'Can you look after this money for me?' or something like that.*

Lucy*: No, I think you have to know people before you can trust them, you can't just meet them and start*

trusting them right away, you have to learn what they're like, then you can think about whether you can trust them or not.

Olivia*: Yes, you have to get to know the person before you can risk trusting them, know what they're like and so on.*

The children described the familiarity of the local communities as creating a trustworthy and secure atmosphere. However they also discussed unpleasant incidents that created feelings of mistrust toward strangers. One example was that of drunk and obnoxious strangers behaving in a disruptive way at village festivals.

Discussion

This study describes rural children's perceptions of social capital from perspectives of wellbeing. The results reveal that the spatial isolation that characterizes rural areas creates a special context of social network structures, cohesion and trust, but is also a breeding ground for exclusion and social control. The stories revealed paradoxical feelings of living in a good and safe area that also felt isolated and restricted. The findings of this study differ from earlier research by offering insight into the complexity of the bonding social capital perceived by rural children.

Rural life offers an interesting depth of community attachment and familiarity within the local community, which in turn creates feelings of trust and security; these factors generated feelings of wellbeing among the children in the present study. These results, focusing on the positive features of bonding social capital within the community, differ from the experiences of children living in urban, low socio-economic neighborhoods. The urban children in a study by Morrow lacked a sense of belonging to the neighborhood, and further, experienced their neighborhoods as unsafe and distrustful, and reported dysfunctional relationships with neighbors[2]. Morrow concluded that the bonding social capital among urban children was derived from people (friends and family) alone and not, as in our

study, also from the sense of belonging to the local community. This finding may be specific to children growing up in a rural context[8].

However, these tight and close-knit bonding networks in the community and in school may also have negative effects on children's wellbeing. Exclusion and problems with integration for newcomers can be seen as particularly problematic in areas with limited options when choosing friends. The sense of inconvenience stemming from social restrictions is consistent with previous research on children's perceptions of rural community life, revealing that youths perceive the close-knit community as controlling and intrusive[20,24]. Furthermore, the limited opportunities for social interaction with friends reported in this study, and the children's perceptions of their surroundings as being isolated and boring, seemed to create a sense of loneliness. Similarly, previous research has pointed out that rural youth saw their area as a fine place to grow up in but also experienced a lack of leisure time resources and social spaces[24], especially if they were not interested in organized sports[20,21,23]. Thus, our results highlight both the negative and the positive influence of bonding social capital on the wellbeing of rural children. This complex picture shows that it is important to neither romanticize the social life of rural children, nor to describe it in terms that are only pessimistic[23,32].

Bridging social capital constitutes another noteworthy aspect of rural children's social life and seemed, in the present study, to have a significant importance for wellbeing. Participating in an organized activity may be beneficial in providing opportunities to socialize with friends with whom special interests are shared, and may promote bridging social capital. This finding may apply particularly in rural settings because participation in associations and sporting activities can compensate for the sometimes limited free-time access to friends and social networks[33].

The school constitutes a setting where bonding and bridging social capital simultaneously act and are produced. Our focus groups members' interaction with friends took place primarily in the school. While the small, rural schools

sustained the existing bonding networks, the school was also viewed as a place to meet new people, and therefore constituted a crucial setting for rural children to be a part of bridging social networks. Obviously, children view the school as a community on its own, and one fundamental to social interaction and therefore of importance for wellbeing and sense of belonging[2].

The authors who conducted the interviews had experience in working with children. They were also familiar with the rural context because they had spent reasonable amount of time living in similar areas. This pre-understanding of the context may have been useful when gathering data, in terms of facilitating an ability to deepen and develop the group discussions. However, it could also have been a weakness, if statements had been taken for granted and important statements not thoroughly probed.

There are ethical problems specifically related to focus group research. The discussions during the interviews are shared with all the participants in the group, thus making it more difficult to protect the participant's right to confidentiality. However, before the interviews, the children were reminded to keep the discussions within the group and not to reveal any more than they wanted to. Each focus group was single-sex, providing four groups of girls and three groups of boys. Homogeneity with respect to sex is frequently recommended when conducting focus groups with children because mixed-sex groups can hinder group productivity[28,29,34]. Further, in order to promote discussion advantage was taken of pre-existing aquaintances by choosing group members already well known to each other[27,29,35]; this strategy also reduced the otherwise unequal power relations between researcher and participants. To decrease power imbalance and to reduce the risk of eliciting only socially desirable answers, the children were reminded that there were no wrong or right answers, and that they could choose *not* to answer questions. To improve the comfort level, the interviews opened with snacks and small talk[29,36].

Conclusions

In conclusion, the concept of social capital constitutes a useful framework for studying children's perceptions of their social environment. From a rural perspective, this study reveals the complexity of the children's experience of their social environment, and the ways in which their preceptions have both positive and negative connotations for wellbeing. In particular, the results highlight how important it is for health professionals in rural areas to consider the complex influence of bonding social capital on children's wellbeing, and to be aware that it can promote exclusion as well as trust and cohesion. However, there is a need to more thoroughly investigate rural children's notions of bonding and bridging social capital in perspectives of health and wellbeing.

Acknowledgments

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