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Navigating College Choice through Female Peer-to-Peer Capital: The Case of Somali American College-Seeking Women

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we argue that higher education and student affairs has failed to pay sufficient attention to the role of female peer-to-peer social and navigational capital in college choice processes, especially among first-generation, underrepresented, and minoritized college-seekers. While Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005, 2006) highlights valuable forms of capital that marginalized, college-bound populations draw on, the general scholarship employing this model does not sufficiently account for the role of female peers as a connective thread that weaves various forms of capital together to support college choice. We consider the case of a group of Somali American undergraduate women attending a predominantly white-serving institution of higher education to illustrate the ways in which these college-seekers use female peer capital to access and negotiate college choice processes. Implications for higher education practice and research are examined.

Keywords: Female, peer-to-peer capital; College choice; Somali American students; Community Cultural Wealth

Introduction

College access for first-generation, underrepresented, and minoritized (URM) students has been investigated across the social sciences. Scholarship identifies forms of capital that enable majoritized students to more readily access college, and which URM students, families, and communities lack (e.g. Perna, 2000a, 2000b). Yosso (2005, 2006) turns away from deficit perspectives of racialized and marginalized communities, elaborates six forms of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), and reframes “capital” among these college-seeking populations. In this work, we push the CCW framework further by arguing that it does not pay sufficient attention to female peer-to-peer capital. We use the case of Somali American women¹ students attending a predominantly white-serving institution of postsecondary education (PWI) to argue that this form of capital must be highlighted as a key component of CCW. Somali American women students represent a distinct group of first-generation, URM college-seekers who do not typically have access to traditional forms of college-going capital, but instead rely strategically and effectively on female peer capital. Their experiences can inform higher education’s understanding of college

¹ We used an open-ended question, “What is your gender identity?” in the demographic form that was administered to participants, with the aim of being inclusive of individuals who identify as non-binary. All nine participants identified as “female” and cisgender. Thus, following their chosen gender identification, throughout this work, we use “woman” and “female” interchangeably.

choice for other first-generation, URM college-seekers. The specific research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do Somali American women access higher education?
2. What supports do Somali American women draw on as they aspire to college and manage the college choice process?

This paper first reviews literature on college choice, including Yosso’s (2005, 2006) CCW. Next, we contextualize the case of Somali American women collegians. We then detail our methodological and analytical approaches and present our findings. The voices and narratives of participants are centered, as they illustrate their tenacious seeking of college knowledge through female peer networks. Finally, implications for centering this form of CCW by higher education practitioners are considered, and areas for additional research are elaborated.

This study contributes to the literature by underscoring an underexamined aspect of social and navigational capital – that which is provided by female peers. We argue that this form of capital is particularly productive in guiding female college-seekers to gain detailed information, find encouragement, build on the success of peers, and foster a culture of collectivist competition and striving for college success. Overlooking the contributions of women is already a widespread habit in academic analyses, even more so when considering those who are young and minoritized (Ahmed, 2017; Armato, 2013; Savigny, 2017). Instead, we highlight this form of wealth – that is, female, peer-to-peer social and navigational capital – and urge higher education professionals to incorporate this resource into college choice programming.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

Rational choice models are often relied on to explain college choice. These models, like Perna (2000a, 2000b, 2006) and others (Cho et al., 2008; Nora, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005), assert that college choice is made by drawing on forms of economic and habitus capital, both concepts adapted from Bourdieu (1977/2013). Such capital is composed of the skills, resources, and knowledge needed over time to gain access to college. In arguably the most robust iteration of this approach, Perna (2006) builds a model that assumes that individual students make rational choices for initial college enrollment, and that each student makes these decisions within a nested system of layers of situated context. Thus, demand for higher education (made up of academic preparation and achievement) and supply of resources (family income and financial aid) are compared with the expected benefits (both monetary and non-monetary) and expected costs (direct college costs and foregone earnings) of college attendance. This calculation leads to a student’s choice of college.

Smith and Fleming (2006) reason that these models are based on the experiences of white students, white parents – and we add – normative U.S. culture, which is deeply individualistic, ethnocentric, and steeped in whiteness as a system of hegemonic dominance. Therefore, what these models cast as “normal” processes and steps in college choice are actually based on experiences and data from a specific group of students and families (Kiyama & Harper, 2018). In other words, conceptions of inputs are biased towards recognizing and normalizing those that center white, upper and middle class, “American” families, thus constraining the ability to see the strengths and wealth that non-white, lower class, immigrant and refugee families bring to

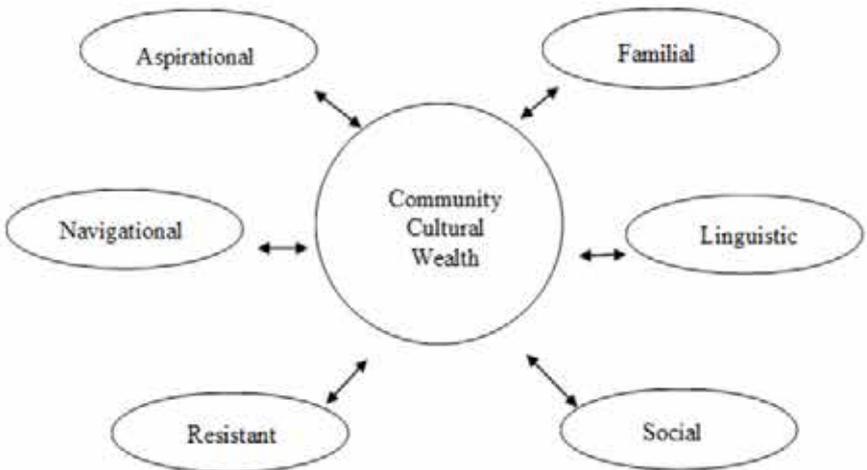
college-going processes. A number of scholars (Jayakumar et al., 2013; Nora, 2004; Oakes et al., 2002; Oakes, 2003; Oseguera, 2013; Pérez Huber, 2009; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Yosso, 2005, 2006) have articulated college choice models that push up against normative models.

Community Cultural Wealth

Drawing on Critical Race Theory, Yosso (2005, 2006) abandons deficit perspectives on racialized and marginalized communities and elaborates six forms of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) that exist in abundance in many communities. These include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (see Figure 1). Yosso (2005) defines these as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77).

Figure 1

A model of community cultural wealth. Adapted from Yosso, 2005.



Aspirational capital centers on hopes for the future, dreams, and goals “even in the face of real and perceived barriers” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). This capital derives from parental encouragement, storytelling, and the cultivation of aspiration. *Familial capital* is cultural knowledge that “carr[ies] a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). This entails collectivist responsibility and belonging, certainly beyond the nuclear family, including “lessons of caring, coping” and “inform[s] our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness” (p. 79). *Linguistic capital* consists of abilities, knowledge, and insights that come from multilingualism, such as storytelling, poetry, music, and other art. *Social capital* comprises “network[s] of people and community resources” that aim to uplift larger

communities (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). *Resistant capital* is “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (p. 80). *Navigational capital* includes “skills of maneuvering through social institutions,” particularly those not designed for Indigenous folks and people of color (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Both Yosso’s and subsequent work employing her model assert that forms of capital overlap, interplay, and co-construct resources for college-seekers.

The Case of Somali American College-Seekers in the Twin Cities Area

Since 1992, large numbers of Somali refugees and immigrants have moved to the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and this region now constitutes one of the largest residential hubs in the U.S. (U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2004). The 2015 Census estimates that there were some 57,000 Somali Americans in Minnesota, although other estimates range from 30,000 to 100,000 (Wilhide, n.d.). Somalis have become part of the landscape and culture of the region. They are productive members of the larger community, contributing to the economic, political, and cultural health of the area (Bigelow, 2010; Carlson, 2007).

Pursuit of education is strongly valued among Somali Americans (Bigelow, 2010; Johnson, 2018). There is little published data about secondary and postsecondary enrollment and completion, but what does exist notes that “Somali student achievement ... has been consistently lower than white, native English-speaking peers’ academic achievement” (Johnson, 2018, p. 9). Unlike other “model minority” African immigrant college-goers, Somali Americans don’t often come to college with deep sources of financial capital or parental college knowledge (George Mwangi, 2018; Minnesota Compass, n.d.). However, a group of undergraduate women students attending a public institution seem to persist at higher than average rates as they pursue their postsecondary education. We use this case to explore how female peer capital serves as a source of CCW.

Method

Participants and Data Collection

Data came from 11 semi-structured interviews conducted from Fall 2015 through Summer 2017 with nine undergraduate Somali American women students attending a PWI. The initial round of nine interviews was conducted in Fall 2015 and Spring 2016. Participants were asked about college choice, the role of family, conceptualizations of higher education, and experiences in the classroom and on campus. Interviews lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours each. The second round of interviews was conducted with two of the nine women in Summer 2017, in order to follow up on experiences on campus after the contentious presidential election of 2016 and the anti-immigrant, Islamophobic rhetoric that targeted Somali Americans (Abdi, 2019; Stassen-Berger, 2016). Questions in the second round were less structured and focused on student sense of belonging on campus, the general racial climate, and several recent hate crimes.

Below are the demographic characteristics of the nine participants (Table 1). All identified as “female” and Muslim. Ages ranged from 18 to 29 years old, with the eldest being an individual who returned to college after several years off. Seven participants came from low-income backgrounds, and two were middle-income. All participants were naturalized U.S. citizens. The range in number of years lived in the U.S. was wide, from only six years to 25 years.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics*

Age	Gender	Citizenship	Years in U.S.	Religion	Socioeconomic Status	1 st to Attend College?
19	Female	U.S.	19	Islam	Middle income	No
19	Female	U.S.	8	Islam	Low income	No
20	Female	U.S.	20	Islam	Low income	Yes
20	Female	U.S.	10	Islam	Low income	No
18	Female	U.S.	13	Islam	Low income	No
20	Female	U.S.	6	Islam	Low income	Yes
20	Female	U.S.	12	Islam	Low income	No
18	Female	U.S./Somalia	13	Islam	Middle income	No
29	Female	U.S.	25	Islam	Low income	Yes

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The research team began analysis by individually reading the transcripts multiple times and generating a list of codes inductively (Saldaña, 2016). We each noted emerging understandings about the data alongside the margins of the printed transcripts. The team then met to compare and contrast initial codes, summarized what we had each tentatively learned, and identified and constructed together a broad range of themes.

Team members then reviewed individual transcripts a second time, specifically focusing on forms of CCW (Yosso, 2005, 2006). We also marked related components, for example, denoting “siblings” as a sub-code affiliated with familial capital, or “tutoring” as a sub-code affiliated with navigational capital. The team met again, compared codes, and assembled themes. This second cycle of analysis revealed the ways in which Somali American women relied on various forms of CCW to support their college-going aspirations. Specifically, data related to familial, aspirational, social, and navigational capital illuminated the ways in which participants assembled resources, made plans, and worked to secure desired outcomes. We use pseudonyms in order to protect participants’ identities.

Researcher Positionalities

While a thorough reflection is beyond the scope of this manuscript, it is critical to acknowledge that researcher positionalities influence both data collection and analysis. As such, we were thoughtful about what roles each of us would play. Since Orkideh is a generation 1.5 immigrant, is the most familiar with Muslim culture, and identifies as a cisgender woman, she served as the sole interviewer. She worked to establish rapport and create an open setting for the interview conversations. Seth and Fernando focused solely on analysis.

Findings

All forms of CCW were evident across the data, although social and navigational capital seemed to play the most critical role in facilitating college choice. In addition, various forms of CCW often intertwined to work together. Below we present five components of CCW that stood out as powerful supports that Somali American women reported drawing on. We argue that the thread which runs through all the forms of CCW is that of female, peer-to-peer capital. It serves as a fastening agent that binds these resources and strategies together.

Ambient Parental Support

Most participants reported strong parental support for their college aspirations. Students expressed that their families valued and promoted achievement of higher education for all children within the family. Parents who had not attended school in the United States could not lend personal expertise to college choice (George Mwangi, 2018). Additionally, parents were often physically absent (e.g. working in another country, working a second or third job, divorced). Instead, parents offered ambient support through providing spending money, transportation, and encouragement.

Guidance from Peer-aged Siblings

All participants came from families with multiple siblings, and participants reported learning specific advice from female siblings who were close in age to themselves. Some students learned about college options from older siblings who had been the first in their families to attend high school in the U.S. Participants referenced siblings' successes and challenges to make course corrections that would increase their own chances of success in bachelors' programs. For example, Aliya expressed:

...my sisters have been going to [community college] for about, like six years, or like four years now, when the idea was two years [of community college] then transfer back [the credits toward a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution], but they are still, you know, like almost stuck...

Sibling role models encountered barriers at community college such as limited financial aid, challenges in balancing family responsibilities with course schedules, and ineffective or inaccessible advising. Aliya reported that for her sisters, "it isn't really their fault. It's just how they always have to stop their -- pause their education for a bit, and work, and then go back again, and sometimes do [school and work] simultaneously." Thus, Aliya decided to attend a four-year school immediately following high school. She learned from her sisters that balancing full-time school with full-time work caused significant challenges, and thus decided to pursue her degree on a full-time basis.

Taking College Credits during High School

Minnesota offers high school juniors and seniors opportunities to take college classes in a high school or community college setting, thus earning college credits. Many participants reported pursuing this route, in order to come into college with credits already completed and thus, to graduate with their baccalaureate degree in less than four years. For example, Muna earned 35 credits at a local community college. Another student, Talia, explained how she learned about post-secondary enrollment options (PSEO):

Well, I was a nosy kid ... So, there were kids in our school that did PSEO before us ... and so I would ask them questions about it, and then I went to the counsellor and I asked her about it ... I would do the research for it, and so I look[ed] up everything I didn't know about it, and ... I made sure that I was on track for everything that they had.

In the narrative above, Talia learned about the details of PSEO from fellow students and her school counsellor, but her individual initiative, research, and persistence were instrumental in allowing her to access this resource.

Fatimah's story about learning about PSEO is similar. She asked her friends and learned that some were already taking college credits at community colleges during their junior and senior years. Although her own high school did not formally offer this program, Fatimah pursued it on her own. Not only did these students realize that entering college with earned credits would ease their transition to baccalaureate education, but they were also already engaged in activities that prepared them for their college choice as high school juniors. They created opportunities for themselves which the institutions around them did not always offer. The navigational capital that this enhancement required is exceptional, especially for a pre-college individual with limited U.S. college knowledge.

Participation in College Preparatory Programs

Participants reported joining college preparatory programs such as College Possible, AVID, Genesis Works, and TRIO Upward Bound, where students obtained valuable information and guidance. Muna explained that program mentors "guided" and "pushed" her to "apply to as many scholarships in all the different colleges that I wanted to apply to." Maryam's cousins insisted that she get involved with TRIO, a federal program designed to prepare individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds for college. Throughout her high school career, Maryam came to campus as many as four nights per week in order to attend TRIO activities. In addition, she enrolled in PSEO and took courses at a local community college. This frequency and total amount of time on two different college campuses surely helped Maryam develop a sense of herself as a college-going individual.

Many students credited college access programs with helping advance their financial literacy. Students took advantage of program support to complete scholarship and financial aid applications. After being accepted for admission, many students made sophisticated decisions about paying for college. Aliya described using a cost calculator that helped her debunk the myth that the school with the lowest sticker price would always be the most affordable. Between need-based aid and scholarships, she ended up attending college with no direct out-of-pocket expenses. Talia and Maryam had similar stories. Talia explained how one institution essentially covered her full tuition, making her final choice clear:

[M]e and my friend, we applied to a lot of colleges. She applied to, like, 11, and I applied to, like, 7 of them... but I didn't go to them because of the financial factor, like they

weren't willing to pay full, all my tuition, and the [PWI] was willing to pay all my tuition, and I got some money back as well.

Networking with Female Peers

Another source of guidance entailed the sharing of information with community members, even among newly made acquaintances. Maryam explained that whenever she saw “another Somali girl” in any of her community college classes, they “just naturally pull together” and “she was just telling me all this stuff” about college and related opportunities. Maryam’s use of the word “naturally” highlights the attraction of community members to one another and their commitment to the success of the larger collective. Participant stories revealed the frequency and depth of information exchange among community members. In one impressive anecdote, Talia recounted boarding public transportation with a friend, and within minutes, befriendng another Somali American woman who was already seated. Talia told the new acquaintance:

‘Oh, we’re like, we’re about to become [high school] seniors. We are looking for programs and whatever’ ... and she said, ‘Oh, you know, there’s a cool program called [program name].’ ...so I wrote it down ... And so, the next day I went online. I found that I couldn’t apply until like the spring, early spring. So I waited, and then I applied early spring. I did the interview that they required. I did the crash course over the summer, and then I [got the internship].

This particular internship program not only strengthened Talia’s college application materials, but also provided a college scholarship. This account exemplifies how community members turned to each other “naturally” through networking and exchanged critical information in order to advance higher education among the Somali American community as a whole.

Discussion and Implications

The findings above show that family, community, schools, and programs were all part of a network of social and navigational capital that contributed to the college choice experiences of these women. However, it is clear that female peers were a key instrument in unlocking these sources of college-going capital. For example, these students learned about PSEO and College in the Schools (CIS) from female peers. They learned about various college preparatory programs from female peers. They were encouraged by peers to persist in these programs, and to take advantage of their offerings. Respondents reported attending college preparatory programs with other peers, almost every night of the week. Over time, respondents competed with one another for admission to various colleges. These female peers processed and discussed possibilities with one another, including how many schools to apply to, the range of institutional types, and the financial aid packages offered. They encouraged each other to make the best decisions for their individual situations.

Female peers looked for one another in classrooms, buses, and other settings, were drawn to one another, and engaged in strategic networking. Respondents listened to the advice of peer-aged female siblings and cousins and learned to avoid challenges that tripped up family members. Findings show that female peer capital is the thread that weaves through every form of guidance and support that these women accessed in the college choice process. In each case, it was interaction with female peers, advice from female peers, competition with female peers, and data exchange with female peers that initiated and upheld pursuit of postsecondary education.

Overlooking the contributions of women is already a widespread habit in broader society (Ahmed, 2017), and certainly in academic analyses (Armato, 2013; Savigny, 2017), even more so when considering women who are young, underrepresented, and minoritized. Thus, it is critical to highlight the role of female, peer-to-peer capital as a thread weaving through and connecting college choice resources for women college-seekers. Female peer capital is productive in guiding college-seekers to gain detailed information, build upon one another's progress, and strive for success in college.

Implications for Higher Education & Student Affairs Practice

Higher education and student affairs practice would benefit by recognizing female peers as one of the most potent sources of college information, as well as an interconnecting thread running through college choice processes. This has implications for many facets of higher education, such as college access programming, admissions, orientation, housing, campus activities, and more. For example, college access programs can anticipate that URM college-seeking women will look to one another for insider information, encouragement, and accompaniment. Such programs could restructure offerings to facilitate this support by prioritizing the hiring of female peer coaches or encouraging female peers to attend activities together. Admissions offices could also redesign their efforts. For example, information sessions and campus tours can welcome participation by groups of female peers, rather than by family groups alone. Information sessions could be held in traditional women's spaces and could be facilitated by female peers. Parallel adjustments could be made for campus orientation and other annual events.

There are also implications for retention and persistence. Administrators could intentionally design housing to allow first-generation URM women to live near one another or to participate in activities in groups. Higher education faculty and staff should work to center collectivist orientations and motivators – such as female peer capital – as valuable, in their programming and curricula, realizing that current conceptions of U.S. college motivations and success are deeply informed by individualistic norms and practices.

Future Research

The need for further research on female peer capital in college choice is evident. Studies on female peer capital among other URM populations are needed, both in the U.S. and in other national and regional contexts. Future research might break down the role of female peer capital in each of the three stages of the college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Comparing female peer capital across institutional types, such as community colleges, private institutions, and research universities would also be valuable. Furthermore, how does peer capital show up for college-seeking URM men? Are there differences in how and when URM male and female students seek peer capital? More importantly, does peer capital play a role in the concerning gender gap that appears across college admissions, retention, and graduation rates?

Conclusion

We applied Yosso's (2005, 2006) theory of CCW to the case of nine Somali American college women enrolled at a PWI to investigate successful college choice. Findings revealed that female peer capital was an interwoven, connective thread running through the various forms of

capital that college-seekers relied on. Attention to female peer capital can inform practice and research in productive and valuable ways.

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Biographies

Orkideh Mohajeri, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education Policy & Student Affairs at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on race in higher education, with particular attention to whiteness as a discursive force in systems, classrooms, curricula and subjectivity. Her most recent work looks at intersectionality as a pedagogical tool in the higher education classroom.

Seth C. Snyder, Ph.D., serves as the Dean of Students at St. Catherine University. His practice and scholarship center diverse and inclusive student experiences in higher education, focusing on improving the equity of higher education institutions and systems. He has a particular interest in supporting first-generation, low-income, and working-class students.

Fernando Rodriguez, Ph.D., is the Director of the Multicultural Center for Academic Excellence at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. He identifies as a first-generation, Mexican American, gay man from the U.S./Mexico border region of Texas. His work leverages the scholarship of feminist Gloria Anzaldúa to examine how Mexican American gay men living along the U.S./Mexico Border construct masculinity, and how these constructs impact their college experience.