

## What Does Avoidance Behavior Really Look Like Among High School Youth?

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INSTITUTE ON DISABILITY/UCED

## Thank You to My Advisors and Partners

- ▶ Dr. Thomas Schram, University of New Hampshire Department of Education
- ▶ Dr. Grant Cioffi (deceased), University of New Hampshire Department of Education
- ▶ Jonathon Drake, Donna Couture, and Kathy Francoeur, UNH Institute on Disability
- ▶ The youth, family members, teachers and administrators in this study
- ▶ My husband and children

## AGENDA

- Background & Context
- Research Questions, Theoretical Concepts and Methodology
- Negative Reciprocity and Avoidance
  - Context and examples
- Instances of Positive Youth Responses
  - Context and examples
- Future research

## Research Interests

- History of working with youth with emotional and behavioral disorders (17 years)
- Interested in delving into the social processes that influence youth disengagement from school
- I knew the youth had fewer social connections than typically developing youth
- Sensed there were power/social issues at play

## Qualitative Research

- Focused on gathering an in-depth understanding of [human behavior](#) and the [reasons](#) that govern such behavior
  - Approaches:
    - Case study
    - Grounded Theory
    - Ethnography
    - Critical Inquiry
    - Phenomenology

## Social Capital

- I used social capital as a sensitizing concept:  
“Sensitizing concepts draw attention to important features of social interaction and provide guidelines for research in specific settings”(Bowen, 2006)
- Definition of social capital that I used:  
“The collection of resources owned by the members of an individual’s personal social network, which may become available to the individual as a result of the history of these relationships” (Van der Gaag & Snijders,2004)

## Social Goods

Acts of caring, empathy, or kindness, among others (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Smith, 2009).

“things such as power, status, or valued knowledge, positions, or possessions” (Gee, 2005, p. 84), individual qualities and actions such as a person’s reputation as trustworthy or responsible, and deference to or solidarity with another.

## Research Questions

- How do at-risk youth perceive, experience, and access social capital as they receive a supportive intervention designed to help them develop and pursue their career and education goals?
- What are the conditions and processes that make social capital more or less accessible to at-risk youth as they plan and pursue their career and education goals?

## Meaning-making in Context

- The sociocultural framework was my theoretical “home”

Social capital is a socially constructed resource, characterized by culture, history, setting, relationships, context, and meaning. I needed to use a lens or approach that would allow me to begin to understand the social actions and behaviors of the youth

## Why I Chose Qualitative Research

I wanted to delve into how at risk students experience “social reality... constructed by and through symbolic and cultural interpretations” (Rogers, 2002).

This task required a methodology that identifies socially-constructed processes and meaning.

## Research

- Focus: The intersection between high school students with emotional and behavioral challenges and the social environment.
- Locus: The setting for “conversations” about social capital with at risk youth, including career-related planning and problem solving using tools designed to build self-determination, create a strong sense of self-direction, and build social connections.

## Ethnographic Methodology Informed by Discourse Analysis

- Spent 17 months “in the field” (Participant Observer)
- Supervised the implementation of a supportive intervention as I audiotaped meetings, took field notes, collected emails and other artifacts.
- 1,200 pages of transcripts

## Ethnography

...facilitates the cultural translation of those experiences from the perspective of the “natives,” that is a different point of view from the researcher’s point of view, described as the *emic* perspective (Agar 2006a).

- I was seeking the youths’ perspectives

## Discourse Analysis

- Language is used to indicate a person’s perspective on the distribution of social goods, with value-laden terms that signal “ what is to be taken as ‘normal,’ ‘right,’ ‘good,’ ‘correct,’ ‘proper,’ ‘appropriate,’ ‘valuable,’ ‘the way things are,’ ‘the way things ought to be,’ “high status or low status,’ ‘like me or not like me,’ and so forth” (Gee, 2005, p. 13).
- The distribution of social goods is political, where people are denied or given access to social goods based upon power and status

## Setting and Context

- Worked in one high school- April 2008- September 2009.
- Observed, worked with youth as they received a supportive secondary transition intervention (RENEW: Malloy, Drake, Abate, & Cormier, 2010)
- RENEW Elements:
  - Person-centered planning
  - School-to-career planning
  - Employment- individualized education planning

## The Youth

- Recruited 9 youth, enrolled 4:
  - Julie: 16 at enrollment, 7 credits, beginning third year in high school. Numerous behavior infractions (tardy, truant, disputes with teachers)
  - Manny: 15 (almost 16) at enrollment, lived in group home, on probation for violation of post-jj placement terms, Hispanic/African American; 1.5 credits starting 2<sup>nd</sup> year of high school.

## The Youth (cont.)

- Shelly: 17 at enrollment; newly-diagnosed with rare genetic, neurological disorder; skipping classes; 16 credits entering 4<sup>th</sup> year of high school. Special education eligible.
- Alex: 15 (almost 16) at time of enrollment; numerous behavioral infractions for fighting, skipping, disrespect, disruption, aggression; 13 credits entering 3<sup>rd</sup> year in high school; Anxiety disorder (states he has bi-polar disorder), special education eligible.

## Analytic Process

From Schram (2006):

1. Descriptive level: What are people doing?
2. Analytic level: What are people trying to accomplish?
3. Interpretive level: What do these actions mean (especially contextually)?

## Text Analysis

- Line-by-line coding while listening: What are people doing? What are the social actions? What are they trying to accomplish?
- Developed categories of action: Groups of social actions that occurred repeatedly and converged across the youth.
- Axial coding: re-read line by line and highlighted important bits of discourse that reflected the categories

## Example:

JM: So, you like to kind of quietly do your work, and not have

too much of the attention on you? **OK.**

Comment [J1]: recognizing

Julie: **Because I have a really hard time focusing on my**

**classes, if I'm there for an hour and a half. It's so hard to**

**to stay concentrated so I'm like, so I'm always [NOISE**

**OBSCURES] somewhere, just like walking, I might**

**[UNINTELLIGIBLE] and I'll go back and start work again. Cause**

**I just can't stay working for the whole hour and a half.**

Comment [J2]: responding, sharing some of her thoughts/needs- indicators of concentration problems- leaves, disengage, avoids

Comment [J3]: explaining why she leaves class and slips

JM: Do most teachers let you do **that?**

Comment [J4]: trying to get at the issues, and problems

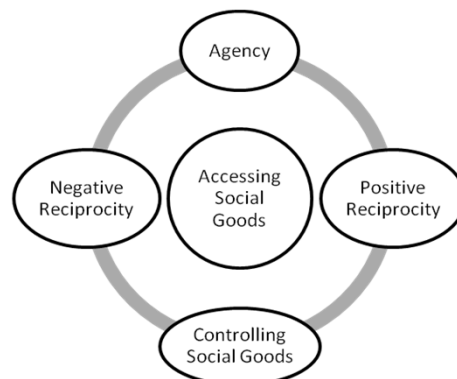
Julie: I just ask to go to the bathroom or **something.**

Comment [J5]: avoiding- coping by avoiding- explaining how she deals with the stress in class

## Creating the Structure

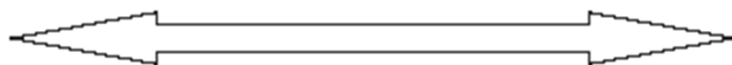
- After 2-3 readings of the texts, I wrote chapters 1-3 (Introduction, Theoretical Orientations, Methodology) and developed 4 categories for 4 analytic chapters based upon prominent categories of social processes:
  1. Positive Reciprocity
  2. Negative Reciprocity
  3. Agency
  4. Control of Social Goods

## 4 Categories of Social Action



## Negative Reciprocity=Avoiding Behavior

Model for Acts of RECIPROcity



Negative Reciprocity		Positive Reciprocity
Social Acts of Avoidance:	Ambivalence	Social Acts of Engagement:
Ignoring	"Dealmaking"	Offering/giving help
Mitigating/minimizing	Negotiating	Help seeking
Rejecting help	Verifying	Sharing strengths and challenges
Withdrawing effort	Rationalizing	Responding to the other
Arguing	Conditional Help	Expressing gratitude
Keeping "score"	Compromising	Engaging in problem solving
Labeling		Truth telling
Lying		

## Contexts Where Avoidance was Prominent



## Example #1: Histories of Failure

Julie: It's just hard, because I don't even talk about things that happen in my life, like, like I said, I just push everything aside and I don't think about it until something really [weird?] big happens.

Ms. McGurk: Right. And then it all boils up, and

Julie: Yeah. It all started when I was 14.....

(Transcripts, September 10, 2008)

## Example #2: The Work: Not Worth the Effort

Transcript: Manny talks about failing his alternative English class:

Descriptive process: What are people doing?  
What is Manny talking about?

Analytic Process: What is Manny trying to accomplish?

Interpretive: What do these actions mean (especially contextually)? What does this mean to Manny? To others?

## Analysis.....

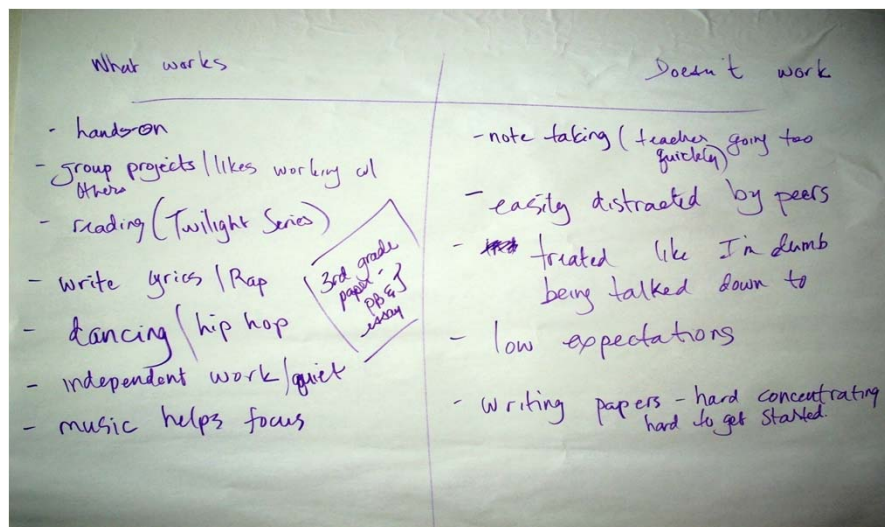
Manny's description of why he shuts down (it's not worth the effort) makes sense in this context:

- He tried to take the book home and he was reprimanded
- The classroom is filled with distractions
- He is not allowed to use his headphones (which would help him)
- He "hates" the instructional method

## Link to PBS and FBA

- What are the processes behind behaviors that function to avoid the work.....
  - the instructional methods need to be engaging (RtI?)
  - The students need to be partners in the planning of the instructional methods
  - Students with learning needs must have supportive instruction (Manny was given a packet and expected to do it himself)
  - Students need to see the link between doing the work and a positive reinforcer

## Manny's Strengths and "Triggers"



## Example #3: Overwhelming Problems

Malloy: When do you want to graduate, then?

Julie: As soon as I can.

Mrs. Fairchild: OK. Some students can graduate, if they have all their credits, that first, after the first semester of their senior year. So, in January.

Malloy: So, she'd need another eight credits. At the very least, worst case scenario, if you were able to do all of this, you're going to graduate on time.

Mrs. Fairchild: [LAUGHTER] She's looking at, I want to graduate early. But you can graduate on time. Which is a great goal.

Malloy: Don't be too excited about getting out in the real world too early, anyway. [LAUGHTER]

Julie: Better than in here. It's like jail.

(Transcripts, October 7, 2008).

## Example #4: Lack of Control

Jenny: What do you think would happen even if you got all your work done?

Manny: Like I don't know

Jenny: Like would he still pass you like what do you think

Manny: Well... I don't like, like I'm the person, I don't know like sometimes he bothers me sometimes like I get a bit in a mood, like I get mad, like I just try to keep it inside me

Malloy: Is this MR Q or MR H?

Manny: Mr. H...and you know

Ms. West: What does he do specifically that sets you off?

Manny: Like sometimes he'll say somebody else next to me, like Randy X., he'll do something stupid and he'll say 'Manny could you please calm down' and I say 'I'm not doing anything' and he'll say 'stop doing it' and 'I'm not doing it'... it just makes me mad. I just hate it when people blame me for something that I did not do....

Malloy: Ummmm. So you kind of shut down...

Manny: Yeah

(Transcripts, January 8, 2009)

## Example 5: Lack of Control

JON: Yeah, we're going to try and move along as much as we can. So, let's talk about school, for a little while, if you don't mind. What do you like best about school? Why do you come here every day?

Alex: I don't want to come here every day. I get made to come here, because my mom, if I get lazy about it, I'm truant, so I have to come to school. I think that's a bullshit thing. I think they should change that, if I have to come in .

JON: OK.

Alex: Because, it's going to be our choice. We want to, if we want an education, we want an education. It's our choice.

JON: So, if you do come to school, is there a reason why you like coming to school?

Alex: Seeing friends, for me. Friends, girlfriend, anything.

JON: Anything else to do with, like, who you are, anything like that?

Alex: No.

(Transcripts, September 23, 2008)

## Example #6: Reprimands, Criticism and Consequences

Manny: A few teachers, to me they make us sound like we know nothing at all, that I come to class and pay attention but I never do my work, so its treating me like I'm dumb, that what it feels like to me

Malloy: Talking down to you

Manny: Yeah, 'I know what you're doing you're dumb' like there were a couple of worksheets that we did and he said 'how did you know to do these, I bet these are wrong,' and I said 'I'm done' and he said 'they can't be right' and he checked them and every one was right

(Transcripts, November 25, 2008)

## Analysis-Avoiding

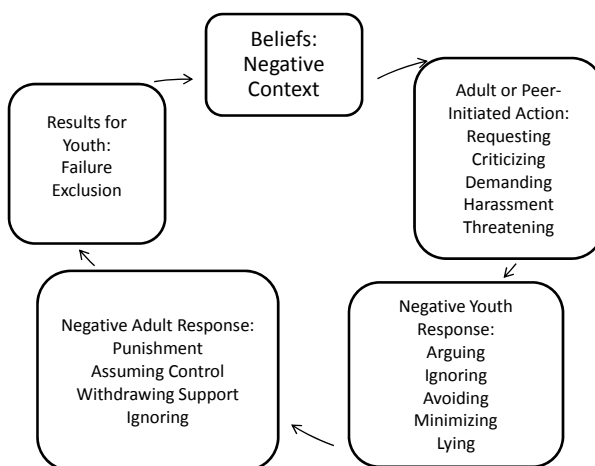
- When viewed through the eyes of the youth, the avoiding behavior “makes sense”:
  - It is not worth putting effort into work that will not lead to success- an unsupportive learning environment
  - It is not worth trying to respond positively to people who are treating “me” unfairly
  - It is not worth trying to respond to people who are punishing me
  - It is not worth trying to respond positively to people who are trying to control “me”

## Avoiding (cont.)

- Manny: the learning environment and instructional methods do not work for him: “I hate it”
- Julie: Avoids it because she has no power (Julie was cyber bullying other young women when we met her)
- Manny: He has been offended “they make us sound like we are dumb”

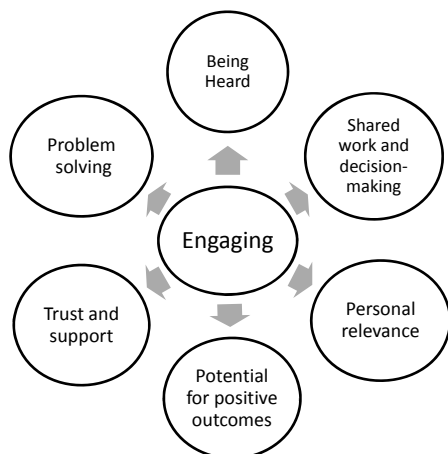
## Cycle of Negative Interactions and Exclusion

\*Adapted from Augsburger, 1992



## Analysis: Positive Reciprocity

Contexts when the youth responded positively:



## Example #7: Julie's Self-Knowledge

What works	What doesn't work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Needs quiet area to work</li> <li>- Likes handouts and start work rather than large group</li> <li>- Write feedback on paper; Do so quietly</li> <li>- Mr. H. → teaching style - fun, sense of humor, helpful, respectful, get the sense he cares</li> <li>- figure things out on their own</li> <li>- when Dad go separate ways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When a teacher runs their mouth and gets into your face</li> <li>- Do not give feedback verbally - does not like a whole conversation about it.</li> <li>- Rude teachers → roll eyes, treat you different, "attitude" thinks they are better than others, make it too personal</li> <li>- Don't like people standing over shoulder saying "you are doing it wrong"</li> </ul>

## Example #8: Manny Experienced Success

Manny: I finished all the math that Mr. H. gave me...

Ms. West: Where is that?

Manny: He has it

Ms. West: Good that's awesome, was he psyched?

Manny: Yeah he said wow, you actually finished a packet in a week that we gave you

Ms. West: They're cracking the whip on you at the group home I believe,

Manny: No... a little bit (we laugh)

Ms. West: So uhhh, I think he's actually I shouldn't speak for Manny what do you think about all of this?

Manny: I feel better than before, I felt better....

Ms. West: You do, that's great

Manny: I don't know why but I felt better...

Mrs. Fairchild: Manny that's huge...

Manny: I don't know why but I felt better...

Ms. West: What do you think can you put words to...

Manny: I go to school today, I pass in my work,

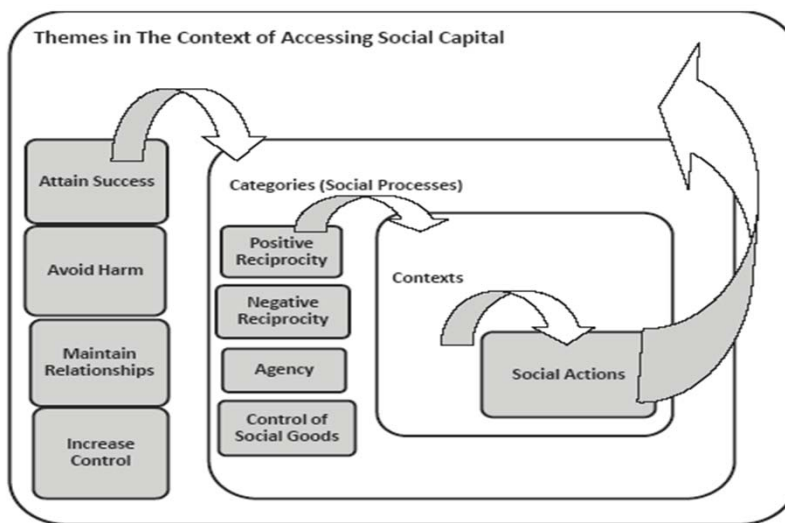
Malloy: Makes you feel like you accomplished something

Manny: Yeah

Ms. West: That's awesome.... I'm glad to hear that  
(Transcripts, January 20, 2009)

## Modeling & Writing:

Only when I came to the end of the analysis was I able to develop a model to bring all the pieces together



## Disempowerment, Social Isolation

Power and subordination (Emerson, 1962):

- The person who has little investment in the social group will find a different community and a different set of social resources.

## Findings:

- Each youth wanted to be successful- they were not sure they could succeed
- Punishment/contingencies had little impact unless the youth was invested in the outcome, trusted the person in control, and was part of the decision
- Shared work and decision-making engaged the youth
- The youth needed to avoid harmful/hurtful interactions
- The youth prevailed-

## Findings (cont.)

- The contexts and environment exacerbated the exclusion of the 4 youth:  
“Positive behavior support (PBS) is a great and worthy idea predicated on the notion that creating a life of quality and purpose, embedded in and made possible by a supportive environment, should be the focus of our efforts as professionals. Our chief concern is not with problem behavior, and certainly not with problem people, but rather with problem contexts” (Carr, 2007, p. 3)

## Findings (cont.)

- The youth needed to be “invested” in the strategies and relationships and then they would try harder, respond positively, gain self-efficacy
- If the youth were not “invested,” then attempts to correct behavior with punitive strategies had no impact
- The youth wanted to be successful

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