The class divide in urban Indian youths' lives; their time-use and adaptive functioning

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CHAPTER 6

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the "experiential niches" of Indian youth aged 10 to 15 from low, middle and high Socio-Economic Status (SES) backgrounds and the related differences in terms of schooling opportunities and subsistence methods utilizing time-use methodology. Developmental outcomes including physical development, linguistic competence and mental health were assessed. As a comparative study, our primary goal was to clarify differences in the lives of rich and poor urban Indian youth and highlight the related differences in terms of schooling opportunities and subsistence methods (Newman et al., 2007) as well as how these are reflected in differences in time spending.

Our study is the first and only youth time-use study conducted in the state of Maharashtra, India and one of very few conducted in India (Kanbargi, 1991). It is also the only Indian study that uses the time spending methodology with youth represented from a very diverse range of socio-economic classes, including minimally literate school-going youth. There is a gap in available data and information from the lowest economic groups on time-use variables such as sleep, physical activity, academic work time and screen time because most Indian studies focus only on child labour. Our study aimed to overcome this knowledge gap. The present study ensured uniformity, reliability and validity in data-collection methodology and coding, by not only training research assistants in administering interviews but also in coding. Data was coded first into 24-hour diaries and then into numerical values. In order to ensure our SES categories were reliable, valid and internationally comparable, the FAS II, an instrument used in over 44 countries, was validated with culturally sanctioned indicators of SES in India. Direct child reports and open time-use categories used in the study ensured that the activities that we documented were not preselected by us but instead were reported by youth, made sense to them and had a link with their personal interest as well as with the specific socio-historical contexts in which they grow up. All these reasons, single out the present study as an Indian time-use study that gives a comprehensive account of youth developmental niches, time-use and resulting developmental outcomes.

In the second chapter of this thesis we started with an account of the rich and poor city contrasts in the education and development of Pune youth. The description was restricted to Hindu customs and did not deal with other ideological frameworks or their interactions in the Indian context. We also focussed primarily on the historically constituted Hindu customs and practices of child-rearing as well as the parental ethnotheories that justify, reinforce, or guide these practices. With this background laid out, the thesis set out to divide the sample by socio-economic class and to ensure that the class divisions coincided with the more culturally relevant strata of Indian society. To do this, the Family Affluence Scale (FAS II) was validated against the more conventional and traditional SES measures and found to be both reliable and valid (Chapter 3). We used this instrument to study in this thesis time-use differences between groups of youth differing in SES backgrounds.

Our fourth chapter concerned the relation between SES and sleep, and whether physical activity time, screen time and academic work time mediate this relationship. We found that higher SES Indian youth sleep less than lower SES youth, a finding contradictory to most western studies (El-Sheikh et al., 2013; Patel et al., 2010), but in line with the hypothesis based on our literature review (Bharti, Malhi, & Kashyap, 2006; Deb, Strodl, & Sun, 2015; Kuriyan, Bhat, Thomas, Vaz, & Kurpad, 2007; Ravikiran et al., 2014; Suri, Sen, & Adhikari, 2008; Verma & Sharma, 2003; Verma et al., 2002). Although we hypothesized that physical activity time, screen time and academic time would mediate this relationship, we found that only screen time and academic time were significant as mediators. While we found that lower SES youth were more physically active and also slept more, we did not take into consideration moderators of the effects of SES on sleep. We simply analysed the relation between physical activity and sleep, rather than the more complex analysis of conditions under which physical activity and sleep might be related. Western literature points to the inconsistencies in the relation of physical activity and sleep (Olds et al., 2011; Pesonen et al., 2011) lending reason to our findings. Our next findings suggested that screen time and sleep are negatively related, but poor youth spent more time on screens than rich youth. Also, academic time and sleep are negatively related and rich youth spend more time on academics than poorer youth (Verma et al., 2002). These two findings are seemingly paradoxical but can be explained by our analysis, in that we found that the sleep loss experienced by poorer youth on account of screen time seemed overshadowed by the sleep loss experienced by richer youth on account of academic work. Richer youth spend a great deal of their waking hours on academic tasks (Liu et al.,2005; Verma et al., 2002; Wang et al., 2013), as also seen in other Asian cultures including Japan, Korea, Taiwan and China (Corno & Xu,

2004; Harnisch, 1994; Kwok, 2004). This study adds to a growing body of literature that suggests that in Asia study-related stress and school demands might be so large that they intervene with children's sleep (Corno & Xu, 2004; Harnisch, 1994; Kwok, 2004). Next, we aimed to analyse whether sleep, child labour and academic work mediate the relation between SES and linguistic and mental health outcomes. All these mediators are studied simultaneously so as to help us understand the power of each in comparison to the other. As in the west, we hypothesized and found that poorer youth fare worse than richer youth on tests of language proficiency and mental health problems (French & Kingdon, 2010; McPherson et al., 2014). We also expected these poorer children to engage in more child labour, less academic work and more sleep. All three patterns were seen, and we postulated that this was on account of the economic hardships faced by these families and their need for household assistance coupled with parental disillusionment with the education their children were receiving and poor quality public education. Also, it was the richer children who slept less, potentially because of parental and school pressure to perform well academically. Child labour was the only mediator of negative developmental outcomes in terms of predicting both poorer linguistic scores as well as worse mental health outcomes. Poor school-going children may have to bear the double burden of going to school and of having to work before and after school hours in laborious and mundane tasks, that sometimes put them in positions of personal physical and emotional risks (Woldehanna & Gebremedhin, 2015). Written about as "lost childhoods" (Blanchet, 1996), the phenomenon of school-going working children needs further investigation in terms of mechanisms underlying the pathways that lead to their poor developmental outcomes. Academic time had a significant and positive effect on linguistic outcomes suggesting that it scaffolds some forms of learning (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005) but it did not predict fewer mental health problems. Especially for poor children academic work was related to better linguistic outcomes. It seems that for enriched linguistic inputs and for space and time to use or train with more complex language structures these lower SES children depend more on schools than rich children do. These same poorer children are more engaged with all kinds of labour. If labour can be substituted with academic work, it may help in improving linguistic scores and reduce mental health problems. For richer children it is possible that their SES allows them to encounter adults and other children with good linguistic skills in settings other than academic ones. For richer children, it is probable that mental health and language competence is more a function of their socioeconomic advantage than their time-use, given that there are greater chances of them being protected from physical harm and having access to stimulating and

nurturing environments during critical childhood maturational phases (Nambissan, 1996). We found that sleep was not significant as a mediator and this could indicate sleep durations in our sample did not qualify for any cut-offs of sleep deprivation. This is corroborated by findings of a study that suggest that although Asians sleep less than Westerners on account of academic workloads, these shorter sleep durations do not predict worse mental health outcomes (Lushington et al., 2015), because sleep is related to worse outcomes on tests in a dose-response manner (Hysing, Harvey, Linton, Askeland, & Sivertsen, 2016). This is a significant finding in terms of how cultural patterns are important in consideration of the effects of sleep on health outcomes.

Overall, we saw that rich and poor Indian youth have different time-use patterns. Socioeconomic differences are important in not only directly predicting developmental outcomes but also via pathways such as youth time-use. As a comparative study, the most significant findings predicting worse developmental outcomes and, hence, life chances was the time youth spent in labour, including all types of paid, unpaid and household chores.

Implications of the Study

Important implications of the study reported in this thesis have partly been presented already as deliverables of the study and concern the research instruments prepared for and validated in the study. First of all we validated the globally most frequently used indicator of child and adolescent SES, the FAS II (Elgar & Currie, 2016) for use with urban Indian youth. In addition we have set important steps for the validation of other instruments in that we carefully translated the English language version of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997) to Marathi using a translation – back translation protocol. We also translated and adapted The Home Observation for Measurement of Environment (HOME) Inventory (Bradley & Caldwell, 1984), particularly the Middle childhood and Early Adolescence Scales for use in Hindi and Marathi. For these implications we can show the products, other implications need to be argued and concern policy development and policy implementation.

This study suggests that schools matter in the lives of young people. It showed that youth and their parents who live in affluence push towards good school results. For economically privileged children, academic work is considered to be the pathway to future monetary security (Deb et al., 2015). Privileged youth who worked longer hours on academic tasks, may have slept less to ensure that they comply to the social expectation of doing well in school. In lower SES families parents seem to have more

reservations about the benefits of spending long hours on academic tasks. They do not share the faith in the educational system granting future jobs and income. In chapter 2 we wrote about the caste system as an important conservative force or threshold in realizing a meritocratic community through school education. We also presented the divide between public and private schools. In India it cannot be taken for granted that all schools have facilities like their own toilets, clean drinking water and "pucca", all-weather structures to shield children from the intense heat and rain. In the economically disadvantaged schools, read public schools, there is considerable absenteeism among teachers, late arrival and early departures of these teachers, a chronic teacher shortage and lack of teaching by teachers who show up. The actual teaching time is no more than one fourth of what would happen in a well-functioning school system (Drèze & Sen, 2013). This obviously affects the quality of inputs that children receive and hence affects school engagement and academic performance (Rivkin & Schiman, 2015). A moot point to consider is that school-going children who also work before or after school-hours, suffer a double burden of having to juggle between work and study demands (Woldehanna & Gebremedhin, 2016). While studies report child labour benefits for family welfare, they discount individual wellbeing. This is precisely what the current study findings also showed.

In terms of policy development this means that policy has to be adapted towards more effective efforts to improve teacher qualifications and morale and that more has to be done to make sure that academic performance in lower SES youth is better aligned with youth's career chances. As the presented study showed, for children from lower SES, the direct engagement of children with school assignments is indicative of their English language proficiency as well as of their behavioural competences in terms of steering clear of problems; important resources, not just for the youth, but also for the communities in which they live.

Changing educational policies, without a doubt, is an enormous challenge in India. We already referred to the caste system as an important hurdle. Circumstances contributing to the high rate of drop out from public schools is another one. On several occasions in this thesis we reported on the problematic drop-out, predominantly among public school students. The earlier mentioned lack of alignment between academic performance and career chances or doubts about this alignment is a risk factor, but certainly not the only one. Other risk factors were mentioned in Chapter 2 about the educational and developmental contexts of school-going youth aged 10-15 from Pune. Here we return to one of these, viz., ethnotheories about developmental stages or ideologies surrounding childhood, adolescence, and gender. Ayurveda, an

ancient Indian text recognizes the stage of late childhood (7-12 years approximately) or the "Kumara" stage as the stage of a child's social birth and familial dissolution (Kakar, 1981). It is also a stage of apprenticeship for both sexes with boys coached in matters of trade and commerce and girls in more household management matters (Saraswathi & Oke, 2013). Westerners define adolescence as the stage between childhood and adulthood where one is faced with many issues related to one's identity and biology. It can be a strenuous yet exciting time for both the children as well as their parents. In India however gender, class, and locale milieu govern the conditions under which children from the ages of 10 to 18 mature (Saraswathi & Oke, 2013). The practice of prepubertal marriages or marriages immediately following the first menstrual period, is still followed in the lower classes of urban Pune. This is a major cause of school drop-outs at this age. This is also the reason why adolescence as a fundamental developmental stage was questioned in a paper by Saraswathi (1999) wherein young girls assume adult responsibilities skipping adolescence altogether. Again, these are notions, ideologies, or customs that will be hard to change, because they are rooted in fundamental and utilitarian everyday practices in Indian families. Nevertheless, if all children are to benefit more from schools, this will need to be changed, and more has to be done to protect children from these risk factors.

Obviously there is much more to discuss in terms of implications of the current study. Some, like the impact of digital media and the risks of labour will be addressed in the next subsection on limitations and future directions. Others, that are clearly akin to youth time spending in urban India, like the dangerous and long hours that many Indian children have to travel between home and school, environmental pollution, and the lack of safe spaces for sport and play, deserve mentioning as well as studies of their own.

Limitations and Future Direction

The current study had some limitations. Objective measures like actigraphs often used in sleep studies were not used by us (Sadeh, 2011). An actigraph is a non-invasive monitor of human activities. It is a small device that may be worn like a wrist watch that records the intensity of motor activities and body posture during a shorter or longer time interval. A connected limitation is that the study mainly depended on student self-reports, although for indicators of SES we also interviewed parents. India, and Pune is no exception, is a multilingual community. We made sure that all research assistants were fluent in English, Marathi and Hindi, to guarantee that during interviews

and the completion of the survey, students could be encouraged and helped in whatever language the students used or preferred to communicate in. Nevertheless, when it came to testing youth's language proficiency only English language fluency was directly tested for. This was done although it is possible that some children despite an English education, were more fluent in Marathi or Hindi (local languages). A final limitation to be mentioned here is that we faced obstacles such as a high drop-out rate from the initial sample, on account of losing several school-going children from the lowest SES due to absenteeism. As a result we may have missed some of the poorest youth with interesting time-use patterns, from our final sample. Although we invested a lot of time and effort in engaging low SES youth in our study, we would like to stress that additional efforts are challenging, but very important.Youth from the lowest classes often absent from school, and those who are out-of-school altogether, would likely and considerably add to the richness of time-use data.

There are more issues that may be considered for future time use studies. In the current study we averaged time spending for weekdays and weekend days. Future time-use studies may focus on weekday and weekend differences, because it is known that youth time-use patterns differ greatly between the two (Gradisar, Gardner, & Dohnt, 2011). A comparable plea can be made for screen time. Television use, mobile telephone use and internet use are very popular and digital media are extensively used amongst all classes of urban Indians. Especially in the lower classes, it is not uncommon to have the television playing in the background for the entire evening on a weekday, or throughout the day on weekend days. In a modern world it is becoming increasingly relevant to know more specifically who has access to each of these screen related activities and what impact they have on the wellbeing, health, and future of youth (Mazzarella, 2010). In similar vein and, particularly with respect to India, it is also important do develop a better understanding of the role of different categories of labour, like paid, unpaid labour, and household chores or work in a family business. Indian legislation, although prohibiting children from engaging in physically hazardous work, yet allows for and endorses home-based as well as after-school work, labeling it as necessary. In fact, such “necessary labour” may contribute to the existing burden of morbidity and mortality. With a growing concern for youth health (Mokdad et al., 2016), future research must more closely examine all types of child labour as a risk and burden for mental and physical health outcomes.

Conclusion

We know that time-use impacts developmental trajectories and life chances and we predicted that time-use patterns and outcomes would be dependent on SES. India made an ideal destination to study rich and poor contrasts due to the existence of both extremes in comparable niches. We also know that children born into poverty experience persistent and higher levels of physical, mental and academic disadvantage. In Pune, a higher number of such youth came from lower castes and went to public schools. They lived in more crowded homes with parents who were lesser qualified and educated, and held jobs that were more menial. Such youth tended to sleep more, engage in more screen time and be more physically active. They also engaged in more child labour, and less academic work time. Developmental consequences were worse for such youth, with higher chances of them being underweight or stunted, scoring lower on linguistic tests and scoring higher on tests indicating the existence of internalizing and externalizing problems. It was seen that when poorer students spent time on academic work, this benefited their language proficiency more than it benefitted richer children. Given its importance, we end with a focus on child labour. As shown by the current study as well as by other studies child labour in the Indian context is a liability to child and youth development. There is a growing concern for youth health (Mokdad et al., 2016) and it is imperative that future public health policies and practices in India address all forms of child labour as a risk and burden for mental health outcomes.

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