

**The Duality of Inequality of Opportunity: The Lived Experience and Influence of
Inequality of Opportunity on the Help-Seeking Attitudes and Behaviors of Low SES
Youth**

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“This thesis has been written as a study assignment under the supervision of a Utrecht University teacher. Ethical permission has been granted for this thesis project by the ethics board of the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Utrecht University, and the thesis has been assessed by two university teachers. However, the thesis has not undergone a thorough peer-review process so conclusions and findings should be read as such.”

Abstract

The phenomenon of inequality of opportunity among youth is becoming increasingly prevalent. Currently, many youth support services are in place to combat its negative effects, but they are unresponsive to the needs of targeted youth. Using semi-structured interviews, this study explores the forms of inequality of opportunity experienced by low SES youth and how this impacts their help-seeking strategies. This study integrates psychological capital into a framework of Bourdieu's Capital (1986), Ungar's Resilience Theory (2008), and Giddens's Structuration Theory (1984) to explore the social psychological factors that shape their help-seeking intentions. The study revealed a nuanced and complex interplay between individual agency and structural constraints in shaping help-seeking behavior among low-SES youth. Different perceptions of effective environmental supports shaped different help-seeking behaviors. Psychological capital (self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism), peer relationships, and stigma were key in influencing this process. Therefore, a balanced approach to research and intervention is needed that considers both structural factors and individual strengths. This prevents stigma and addresses the diverse needs within low SES groups.

Keywords: Inequality of opportunity, help-seeking behavior, low SES neighborhoods, low SES youth.

Introduction

Socio-economic inequality exists in the Netherlands. While 6.1% of children are at risk of growing up in poverty, in contrast, another 3.9% of children live in households with an income of one million euros (CBS, 2023). Furthermore, the Gini coefficient for wealth in the Netherlands is 0.71 in 2022, indicating a relatively high level of wealth inequality (CBS, 2023). These statistics serve to illustrate the socio-economic disparities that are impeding social cohesion, inclusion, and opportunities for all in Dutch society (Vrooman et al., 2023). Socio-economic inequality is intensifying the inequality of opportunity by creating obstacles to accessing resources that facilitate advancement through opportunity (Suter, 2020).

According to the Sociaal-Economische Raad (SER) (2019), inequality of opportunity among youth is a growing trend, particularly affecting youth from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds. A low-SES environment, measured by a family's economic position, educational attainment, and occupation, is often characterized by limited access to capital (Bradley & Crowyn, 2002). This hinders their ability to achieve academic success, socioeconomic mobility, and engagement in public participation (Fahmy, 2006; SER, 2019). As a result, contextual factors limit access to opportunities, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. This runs counter to the current meritocratic principles and beliefs dictated in Dutch society, where everyone is believed to have equal opportunities and that success is determined by individual ability (Mijs, 2016). Additionally, this violates the rights of the child as developed by the United Nations, which states that children have the right to develop in their best interest (Thomas, 2017).

Rising inequality affects young people in several ways, including causing feelings of dissatisfaction, resentment, anger, and stress, which arise when individuals perceive themselves as being deprived of what they believe they deserve compared to others (Haugan et al., 202; Smith & Pettigrew, 2014). These psychological factors, combined with a lack of

resources, influence suboptimal decision-making (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea, 2017).

Furthermore, the experience of inequality of opportunity undermines trust in social institutions and makes people less optimistic about the future (Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005).

In addition, to the challenges posed by unequal opportunities, adolescents face another significant hurdle: the transition to adulthood. Adolescents must navigate complex social relationships with peers, adults, and social institutions while seeking independence and status (Dahl, et al., 2018; Ellis et al., 2012). This is a time when youth are discovering their identities, but it is also a time of increased risk for antisocial risk behaviors, especially for those with an imbalance of risk and protective factors (Watson et al., 2011 & Wiersema et al., 2021). For low SES youth, neighborhoods serve as instrumental meanings for gaining social belonging and support that shape youth behavior and identity (Visser et al., 2015). Youth professionals can provide additional support to low-SES youth, strengthen their sense of responsibility and identity formation, empowering them to shape their lives (Boomkens, 2020; Sonneveld et al., 2019).

Therefore, to combat the negative effects of inequality of opportunity, many policies are in place ensuring the availability of youth support services. However, formal youth services do not always meet the needs and preferences of low SES youth (Visser et al., 2015). Additionally, the government's current Equal Opportunities Action Plan has not shown much impact (Jenniskens et al., 2023). The research identified that young people could encounter barriers when seeking support, such as lack of awareness, understanding and trust, gender roles, and risk of stigma and rejection (Barker et al., 2005; Seamark & Gabriel, 2018). These systematic barriers operating at multiple environmental levels impacting youth may be overlooked, hindering the effectiveness of programs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Although many researchers and policymakers recognize that the development of programs must be informed by the voices of targeted youth, this remains lacking in resilience

research (Shean, 2015). Despite extensive knowledge about the causes and effects of inequality, little is known about how young people perceive and cope with inequality. Notably, young people's perspectives on their disadvantaged situations reflect their views on the availability and effectiveness of support in their environment (Pisani et al., 2012). Furthermore, Doci et al., (2023) emphasize the need to overcome disciplinary boundaries when studying socioeconomic inequalities. The author notes that individual disparities can occur within a homogeneous group, which limits our understanding of how low SES youth cope with inequality. By examining how experiences of inequality influence help-seeking attitudes and behaviors, this study addresses an important gap in the literature.

To this end, this paper seeks to answer the following question: *What forms of inequality of opportunity do youth from low SES neighborhoods experience and how does this influence their help-seeking attitudes and behaviors?* To answer this research question, the following sub-questions are formulated: What forms of inequality of opportunity do adolescents from low SES neighborhoods experience in their daily lives? And, how do sociopsychological barriers and facilitators influence help-seeking attitudes and behaviors among youth from low-SES neighborhoods? By elucidating this relationship, this study aims to contribute to informing youth support services for increased effectiveness. This is a step forward in ensuring that society benefits from the talents of all, not just those born privileged.

The following theoretical framework will provide a comprehensive overview of how different forms of capital interact influencing the opportunities and support systems available to low-SES youth.

Theoretical framework and Literature Review

Inequality of opportunity

Inequality of opportunity refers to disparities in individual and group outcomes that result from disparities in available capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu identified three distinct forms

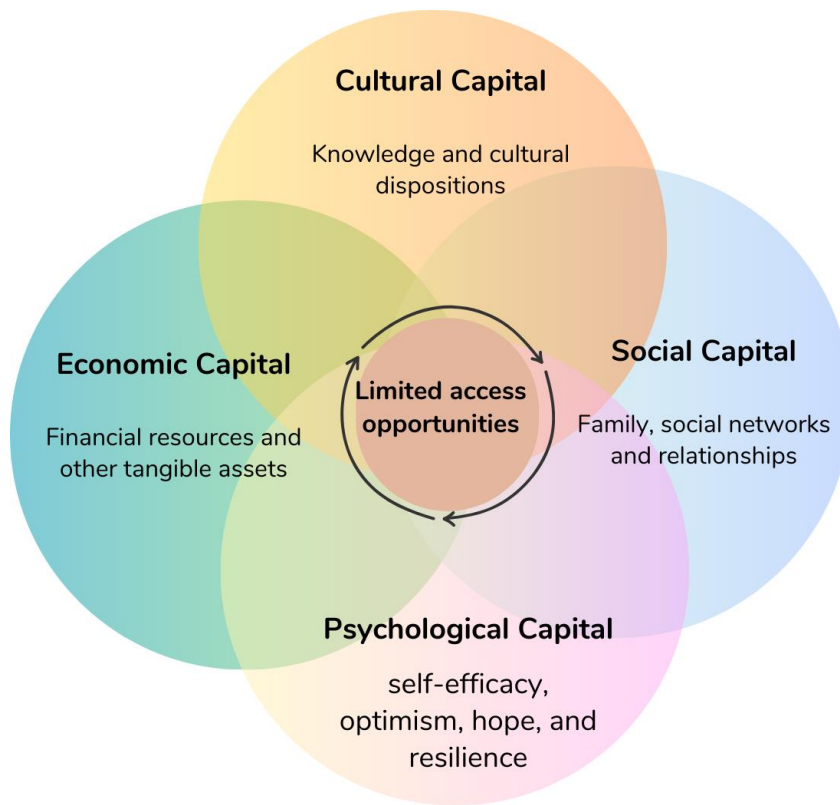
of capital: economic (income and wealth), social (friendships and social networks), and cultural (knowledge of the system). He asserts that understanding inequality depends on understanding the interplay of these forms of capital, which individuals accumulate over time. This capital provides access to valued goods, services, and information such as education, health care, and social networks (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012; Zhu 2021).

Individuals use these resources to navigate social structures, create opportunities, and achieve life goals. Differences in available capital perpetuate inequalities through mechanisms of reproduction and challenge notions of equal opportunity (Gilleard, 2020).

In comparison to Bourdieu, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory posits that resources shape social structures, but youth also have the agency to transform or reproduce those structures. He suggests that youth are both enabled and constrained by structures, while their actions simultaneously shape these structures (Coffey & Farrugia, 2013). This concept suggests that individuals interpret and respond to structural constraints in unique ways (Chatterjee, 2019). This phenomenon was acknowledged by Luthans et al. (2004), who recognized that individuals could overcome challenges by drawing on psychological resources. Luthans characterized psychological capital as self-efficacy (confidence to take on challenges), optimism (positive outlook on success), hope (perseverance and goal setting), and resilience (bouncing back from adversity) (Luthans et al., 2004; Luthans et al., 2015). Adolescents can use psychological capital to shape and take advantage of opportunities. Therefore, this study includes psychological capital along with social, cultural, and economic capital in the analysis of forms of inequality of opportunity experiences, which is conceptualized in Figure 1. How this results in limited access to opportunities is outlined in the following section discussing the interplay of capital forms.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Integrating Bourdieu's (1986) Theory & Luthans et al., (2004)



The Interplay of Capital Forms

The interaction of capital leads to different inequality outcomes because different forms of capital can be transformed into each other (Doci et al., 2023). This is influenced by time and effort. Economic capital is easily transformed into cultural and psychological capital. For example, financial resources provide access to extended education and access to diverse social networks (Chetty et al., 2022; Gilleard & Higgs, 2020). Educational success increases self-confidence, which strengthens psychological capital (Doci et al., 2023). Conversely, the acquisition of cultural knowledge or psychological resources through education or personal development requires more time and effort (Doci et al., 2023). These transformation processes involve embodiment, which is not easily transferable.

In addition to differences in economic and social capital, low SES youth have a more community-focused culture in contrast to the dominant high SES self-focused culture in schools (Zhu, 2021). As a result, they must navigate differences in social and cultural practices between home and school, which impacts academic achievement and aspirations (Zhu, 2021). Nichols (2018) showed that this increases feelings of being out of sync with school or others in society. These youth focus on strong community ties and use peer-recognized cultural assets and local knowledge to increase their social capital (Coburn, 2011). Kennedy et al. (2017) show that street-involved youth are often embedded in supportive social relationships that provide support and resources. This, in turn, strengthens their sense of belonging, confidence, and overall view of their future (Doci et al., 2023).

These interactions between different forms of capital are complex and mutually reinforcing, as well as mutually supportive. This dynamic makes it difficult to measure the precise impact of inaccessibility to any one type of capital on youth's well-being and resulting help-seeking strategies. Therefore, this study aims to elucidate the underlying processes rather than their precise impact, which will be described in the following chapter.

Sociopsychological consequences of socioeconomic inequality

Systematic disparities resulting from limited opportunities mediate the experiences of youth, influencing their behavior (Bourdieu, 1998). This mechanism can be explained by the social patterns of distress (Mirowsky & Ross, 1986). Individuals perceiving themselves as having low SES and residing in underprivileged neighborhoods often experience decreased sense of control (Ross et al., 2001; Sheehy-Skeffington, 2020). This increases the perception of an individualistic world and erodes faith in the social system (Easterbrook, 2021; Ross et al., 2001). This powerlessness gets internalized and translates into a belief that external factors largely determine their life outcomes, causing feelings of distress (Hurst et al., 2016). Consequently, their beliefs in the possibility of achieving socioeconomic success are affected and they adjust their engagement in behaviors that promote future success (Browman et al., 2019;). This undermines their motivation to take effective actions. Hence, the conditions and perceived social positions experienced during upbringing influence individuals' attitudes and choices (Easterbrook, 2021; Hurst et al., 2016; Kullberg et al., 2021). How this, in particular influences seeking support, is outlined in the following section.

Influences on Help-seeking behaviours: a multilevel perspective

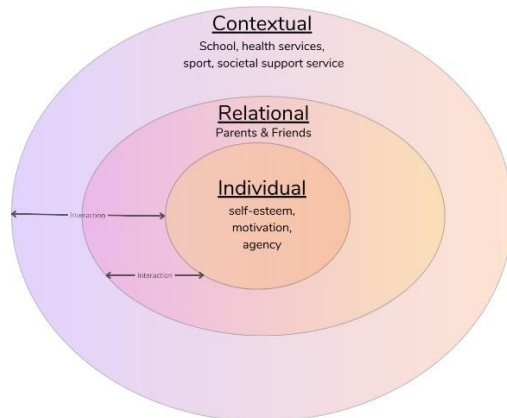
Help-seeking attitudes and behaviors encompass the inclination to resolve personal issues by seeking support from the surrounding environment, including informational, material, social, or emotional assistance (Asser, 1987; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Structuration theory posits that the availability of resources within the social environment can either liberate or constrain youth's choices (Coffey & Farrugia, 2013). In a similar vein, Ungar (2013) extends this idea by emphasizing the role of social ecology in shaping youth support systems.

According to Ungar, help-seeking is influenced by the availability of resources across three levels: individual, relational, and contextual. At the individual level, personal skills and knowledge are critical. Youth find support within themselves through psychological resources such as self-esteem, agency, and motivation (Ungar, 2008). Low-SES youth who possess these factors and are aware of available support resources are more proactive in seeking assistance (Boxer et al., 2011; Drapeau et al., 2007; Lindsey et al., 2006). On the relational level, low-SES youth rely on support from their social network, including parents and friends (Ungar, 2008). Those with strong support networks and a sense of environmental support are more likely to seek help when facing difficulties (Böhmer, 2023; Drapeau et al., 2007; Lindsey et al., 2006; Ungar, 2008). On the contextual level, youth seek support outside their social network, such as societal support services, school resources, or organizations related to sports or religion (Ungar, 2008). Access to these resources, social cohesion, and feelings of safety influence an individual's comfort in seeking help (Ballard et al., 2023; Drapeau et al., 2007; Ungar, 2008). A conceptualization of this Ungar's Resilience model is displayed in Figure 2.

In summary, Low-SES youth are more likely to seek help when they feel supported by their environment, have confidence in available resources, and can effectively utilize this help. Therefore, help-seeking requires not only the availability of resources but also the individual's ability to recognize and approach support sources (Ungar, 2008). Hence help-seeking is constructed by the interaction between the individual and his socioecological environment (see Figure 2). Research indicates that several barriers and facilitators can influence this help-seeking process. These factors and how they impact help-seeking are outlined in the following section.

Figure 2

Conceptual Framework of a Youth Support System based on Ungar's Resilience Theory (2008)



Barriers and Facilitators to seeking help among low-SES youth

Stigmatization

Youth growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods often face stigmatization and negative stereotyping at both interpersonal and institutional levels (Kullberg et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2001; Williams, 2009). Stigmatized individuals may experience status loss and discrimination (Lee, 2017). This stigma causes youth to internalize their low SES environment and make it a central aspect of their identity (McBride & Murry et al., 2011). This leads to lower self-esteem and feelings of alienation from the outside world (Lee, 2017). Prins & Wiersema (2017) found that adolescents from disadvantaged neighborhoods in the Netherlands often feel rejected by or not belonged to society. This strengthens their connection to each other and their attachment to the neighborhood (Kullberg et al., 2021). As a result, they may face barriers accessing support, due to feelings of shame, fear of being judged or misunderstood, or having their self-concept challenged (Carter & Forsyth, 2010; McBride Murry et al., 2011). Furthermore, stigma contributes to mistrust in institutions preventing them from

seeking help (Kullberg et al., 2021). The following section elaborates more on how trust is diminished and how this impacts help-seeking among low SES youth.

Trust

Adolescents in disadvantaged neighborhoods often experience lower social trust and receive less help (Tuominen & Tikkanen, 2023). Kullberg et al. (2021) concluded that in disadvantaged neighborhoods in the Netherlands, there is a pervasive culture of silence and disrupted communication. Contributing factors include high residential mobility, ethnic heterogeneity, family disruption, and poverty, which lead to reduced social control and disorganization. These external threats and challenges reinforce a sense of powerlessness and increase distrust among residents (Ross et al., 2001). Decreased trust among residents, reduces collective action and weakens social support networks (Prins & Wiersema, 2023; Kullberg et al., 2021). Hence, this trust deficit can be perpetuated by a "negative spiral of exclusion," where societal barriers prevent youth from fully participating and accessing support services (Prins & Wiersema, 2023).

Trust and positive relationships are crucial in encouraging youth to seek help from both formal and informal support groups (Stunden et al., 2020). Furthermore, young people express a need for easily accessible support (Wiersema et al. 2021). Therefore, promoting equality and creating an inclusive environment that fosters trust, reciprocity, and mutual respect is essential (Stunden et al., 2020). In addition, youth support should include genuine interest, involvement, availability, equality, and positive reinforcement (Wiersema et al., 2021).

Method

Building upon the theoretical insights of Bourdieu, Giddens, and Ungar this study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach. The previous section explained the need to

integrate psychological capital into Bourdieu's capital framework and the multilevel perspective affecting help-seeking strategies. A qualitative approach is chosen because subjective evaluations, reflecting psychological and social outcomes, better predict individual responses to social disparities than objective indicators (Easterbook, 2021). In addition, the absence of youth voices in resilient research demands a qualitative methodology (Shean, 2015). The specific methodological design and methodological steps taken are further elucidated below.

Methodological design

Subjective understanding and context enable the understanding of youth's lived experiences and the nuanced meanings they attribute to these experiences (Tilley & Taylor, 2018). Furthermore, qualitative measures allow for the identification of new factors pertinent in the process (Shean, 2015). This will ensure the unraveling of new theoretical insights, which cannot be observed by fixed constructs (Draper, 2004).

To ensure the validity of this study, a respondent validation and triangulation strategy is employed (Bryman, 2012). During all interviews, the interviewer provided a summary of what the interviewee said to check for accurate understanding. In addition, all data is cross-checked with secondary data collected by other students within the Minding the Gap project to avoid misunderstandings. Consistent data collection is ensured through the use of semi-structured interviews with an interview guide.

Participant and recruitment procedure

Participants were adolescents between the ages of 16 and 25 who had lived in low SES neighborhoods their entire lives. This age group was chosen because they are more able

to reflect on their childhood experiences and the choices they made regarding help-seeking. The sample consisted of adolescents with Dutch, Moroccan, and Turkish ethnic backgrounds.

Participants were recruited in collaboration with the Minding the Gap project and through the researchers' networks using purposive sampling (Bryman, 2012). As the Minding the Gap network is concentrated in Kanaleneiland, most of the participants lived there. However, some participants who were recruited through the researcher's network lived in different parts of the Netherlands. Interested youth applied by completing an online application form or by sending a personal message to the researcher. In the self-selection process mainly men applied. Therefore, the role of gender in shaping experiences of inequality could not be analyzed.

Methods

19 semi-structured interviews were conducted using open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted in person at the youth center or online via Microsoft Teams due to distance constraints. Before each interview, the context was explained in a letter and repeated verbally. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, was conducted in Dutch, and was then transcribed.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of specific topics while maintaining the flexibility to pursue topics explored by the adolescents themselves (Bryman, 2012). This method mitigates the risk of theoretical assumptions or researcher bias driving the discussion. The theoretical concepts previously outlined were operationalized by asking about lived experiences and perceptions related to neighborhood advantages and disadvantages (Ungar, 2005a). This revealed neighborhood risk and protective factors. In addition, they were asked about their perceptions of youth services in the neighborhood (Ungar, 2005b). See Appendix 1 for the interview guide.

Nonverbal cues and cultural assets were analyzed to understand the meaning behind the participants' stories. Community engagement within the youth center allowed for observation of context, culture, and social norms, enriching the data set by extracting meaning from attitudes and experiences.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining approval from the ethics committee (nr. 24-0717). Participants were provided with information regarding the research purpose, topics, and methodology. Participation was voluntary and they retained the right to withdraw anytime. Permission for audio recording was asked, and pseudonyms were used to safeguard participants' privacy. Furthermore, participants were offered access to the research findings upon request.

The well-being of participants was of paramount importance throughout the study, given the sensitive nature of exploring experiences of inequality. During interviews, their well-being was actively monitored, and an atmosphere of equality was fostered through informal conversations and humor. Trust was built through informal engagement before and after the interview. Discomfort was observed when discussing negative experiences related to inequality due to discrimination. This prompted the researcher to switch the conversation towards more positive topics, as needed.

The researcher's positionality as a biracial girl from a different socioeconomic background influenced the research process and issues of reflexivity. Acknowledging her privileged position and unfamiliarity with the context, the researcher engaged in an introspective examination of her own biases and assumptions throughout the research process. This ensured the objective collection, analysis, and interpretation of data to accurately represent the voices of low SES youth. To avoid stigmatizing the study group,

specific wording was carefully chosen during the recruitment and interview process, and participants were not approached directly based on their images.

Data analysis

During data analysis, a grounded theory approach was used to test previous theories and develop new theoretical insights (Bryman, 2012). Data were analyzed thematically using both inductive and deductive coding. In the first round, youth narratives were analyzed for common themes using open coding, resulting in code tree 1. In the second round, axial coding was used to explore the underlying processes resulting from experiences of inequality of opportunity. This is presented in code tree 2. Finally, these processes were analyzed in relation to help-seeking behaviors presented in code tree 3. This revealed the overarching codes and patterns. In the third round, selective coding of the *Minding the Gap* transcripts was used to achieve data saturation and to compare the results to further enhance the understanding of the processes. The resulting code trees are presented in (Appendix 2). As shown in the code trees, the heterogeneity and complexity of experiences and social positions were highlighted. These analyses resulted in three overarching themes presented in the following chapter.

Results

All of the youth interviewed acknowledge the financial problems and lower levels of education that are prevalent in their low SES neighborhood. Similar to what was documented in the previous literature review, this could lead to social exclusion, feelings of hopelessness, and ineffective educational support. Comparable to the findings of Visser et al. (2023), they recognized the problems and their impact but did not feel limited in their opportunities by their immediate circumstances or experiences. This suggests that the impact of a low SES environment on sociopsychological outcomes is a complex process resulting in different

help-seeking strategies for adolescents. To disentangle this complex process, the following chapters analyze three different themes: psychological capital, peer networks, and stigma.

The power of psychological capital

Agency and resilience

All participants emphasized their own agency accessing opportunities through self-efficacy. This perspective is exemplified in the following quote from Selim, which illustrates an internalized narrative of personal responsibility and agency.

"No, I never felt like I had fewer opportunities. I did at one point. I felt like I couldn't become a doctor because I didn't have money. I used to feel that way, but that feeling has really subsided with me now. The more you learn, the more you try, the more you show yourself, the further you get in life. If you stay in that mindset, you'll get nowhere. So, at one point I just wanted to get out of that mindset. Now I have a plan for how I want to finish school. And that's exactly what's happening right now!"- (Selim)

The thought of not being able to become a doctor because of growing up in poverty reflects the hopelessness mindset that changes his outlook on the future (Browman et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2001; Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea, 2017). However, Selim subsequently states that this feeling disappeared by actively turning down this mindset. His ability to reframe his aspirations may demonstrate the role of agency in mediating strategies for escaping poverty and shaping optimistic future outlooks (Harper et al., 2003; Keating & Melis 2021). In subsequent discussion, Selim mentioned that this turning point came after his father died and he had to take more control over his life. This could involve introspection and self-awareness, which appeared to lead to personal growth and resilience (Drapeau et al.,

2007). The experience shared by Selim illustrates how low SES youth may navigate personal challenges and develop resilience through reframing their aspirations and managing adversity (Werner, 1996).

Personal responsibility

Many participants emphasized their own responsibility in creating opportunities. Selim's phrases "hard work pays off" and "that's what's happening right now" in the previous quote reflect an optimistic belief that success depends on individual effort. This individualistic belief can be seen as a coping strategy developed in response to growing up in a low-resource environment, using self-efficacy to cope with stress (Tsang, 2012). Previous research has highlighted that adolescents prefer to manage their problems independently and believe that they are the primary agents in solving their problems (Marwick et al., 2017; Salaheddin & Mason, 2016; Wiersema et al., 2021). As Jamal stated: *"You can solve problems better on your own."* – (Jamal). By emphasizing this, it seems that he does not consider external help to be as beneficial as when he is in control (Wiersema et al., 2021).

The emphasis on individual responsibility in current social discourse is not new. Over the past thirteen years, the Dutch government has attempted to reform the welfare state by focusing on deregulation, privatization, and individualization (Jole, 2013; de Mooij, 2006). When the dominant narrative emphasizes that success or failure depends primarily on individual effort, young people are likely to internalize this discourse (Marwick et al., 2017). This can lead them to believe that available opportunities are the result of personal choices rather than structural inequalities (Marwick et al., 2017).

Trust

Some participants, like Omar, also used this language of personal responsibility, but then based it on a lack of confidence in the support available. Omar's following statement suggests this relationship between trust and self-reliance:

"So when you are 15, 16 you need to make sure you have a job. So, when you turn 18 you can pay for things for yourself like clothes and stuff. Your parents will help you, but at one point they will not anymore. Even in other cases, you just have to always be there for yourself because you can never rely on someone else. Because eventually that person will get tired and leave you hanging."- (Omar)

Omar's statement that you can never rely on someone else because they will leave you hanging indicates a low level of trust in the support of others. By making sure he has a second job, he can pay for things himself. Omar's experience illustrates how low SES youth may develop self-reliance in response to limited trust in external support. As discussed in theory, trust and positive relationships are crucial in encouraging youth to seek help from both formal and informal support groups (Stunden et al., 2020). Therefore, this low trust seems to lead to the need to become self-reliant.

In contrast to Omar, Kevin perceived his environment as more resourceful. He emphasized that access to capital creates other opportunities, such as the enhancement of positive psychological resources. *"I have always been able to arrange things for myself, like paying for school and sports. So then I still have the same opportunities because you find a creative way to create them" - (Kevin)*. By mentioning that he has always managed to arrange something, he seems to possess a high level of self-efficacy. By asking contextual actors for payment arrangements, he sought alternative ways to successfully transform structural

barriers. Because more positive perceptions of support predict higher self-efficacy, it appeared that he perceived his environment as more resourceful (Collie et al., 2023).

To conclude, where participants like Omar and Selim found support within themselves, Kevin sought support from organizational resources. These findings are supported by research that discusses how youth who have a higher sense of environmental support are more likely to seek help when facing difficulties (Böhmer, 2023; Drapeau et al., 2007; Ungar, 2008).

The power of Peer Networks

Above, we argued that low SES youth feel responsible for their opportunities, and whether they seek external support depends on perceptions of available resources. Here we argue that peers emerged as a critical support system for all participants. Samil's description of the neighborhood illustrates this:

"We're a friendly community. We all help each other out. Everyone is welcome. And yes, if you don't have any money, they will pay for you. There's no need to pay it back. If you need to borrow something, like clothes, you can just borrow it. We all live close to each other, so everyone wants to hang outside or visit each other." – Samil.

Samil's mention of paying for each other and everyone helping each other echoes the companionship and instrumental support among marginalized youth (Kennedy et al., 2017). These youth rely on their peers for practical support, such as sharing resources like money, and clothing, or providing temporary shelter. It appears that peer support fills in gaps where formal institutions or family resources may be lacking. By paying for each other and ensuring that no one is excluded, peers mask the negative psychological effects of limited financial

resources. These findings highlight the observed interplay and transformative process between social, psychological, and economic capital.

In addition, Ahmed mentions, "*We do everything together, everyone lives nearby and is willing to hang out on the streets.*" - (Ahmed). Samil and Ahmed's reference to hanging outside suggests a habit of gathering together in public spaces. This may be due to the lack of private spaces (Cao & Kang, 2019). Ahmed's mention of everyone living close to each other suggests a dense living environment, which is typical of low SES neighborhoods. This neighborhood characteristic naturally increases opportunities for frequent interaction and bonding (Cao & Kang, 2019). With this in mind, it can be argued that a low-SES environment facilitates the development of strong friendships and supports the idea that low-SES youth tend to have more localized friendships (Chetty et al., 2022). Furthermore, the statement "we do everything together" implies a significant amount of shared time. In addition, Ilai mentions: "*Friends are like family*" - (Ilai). Ilai's comparison of friends to family suggests a meaningful connection that goes beyond casual acquaintance. Marginalized youth often form deep friendship connections with their peers (Kennedy et al., 2017). This is consistent with our findings, where we observed that youth had friendships within their neighborhoods.

Overall, these findings underscore the critical role of friendships in mitigating the challenges faced by marginalized youth (Kennedy et al., 2017). All participants identified friends as their primary source of support. This is consistent with Cicognani's (2011) conclusion that youth primarily cope with minor stressors by seeking help from friends. This sense of belonging and mutual support enhances psychological capital, suggesting the need to consider the mediating effects of social capital on help-seeking attitudes (van Harmelen et al., 2017).

The power of stigma

All of the youth expressed stigmatization by teachers and children and their parents at school, in the media, by the police, or by people on the street. While discussing the advantages and opportunities that the low SES neighborhood had to offer, Samil stated the following:

"Smart people. Yes, I would not have thought that in this neighborhood so many smart people lived. Like, when we were in primary school, everyone told us, you guys are stupid. But now I look around, all my friends are on MAVO or above MAVO (Pre-vocational Secondary Education- Theoretical Pathway)". – (Samil)

Samil's comment that teachers tell them they are stupid reflects his exposure to negative stereotypes. Research shows that this awareness of negative stereotypes is common among youth in low SES neighborhoods (Visser et al., 2022). Samil's surprise at the number of "smart people" shows that Samil's beliefs and thoughts are challenged over time. By acknowledging and highlighting the academic achievements of his peers (MAVO or above), it appears that Samil is exercising agency in reframing the narrative (Visser et al., 2022). Thus, where this stigma was initially internalized, a consequence addressed by McBride Murry et al. (2011), it did not remain as a fixed state of mind. This example highlights the reciprocal influence between the young men's behavior and their environmental contexts. In previous research, stigma appeared to be the most prevalent barrier to help-seeking (Bohmer, 2023). Therefore, stigma may mediate their coping strategies by reducing trust and increasing feelings of misunderstanding (Kullberg et al., 2021).

As previously outlined, trust is an important factor influencing the perceptions on effective support shaping their help-seeking behavior. This is also reflected in the quote of Selim:

"No, no. I would never do that. I don't feel comfortable doing that. It's different. These people, you see them for the first time and then you need to tell them everything. And you don't know what they are going to do with this information."- (Selim)

The reference to not knowing what they will do with the information suggests a lack of trust in people they don't know. This is consistent with research showing that youth from low SES backgrounds often have less trust in institutional support structures (Finkenauer et al., 2023). As outlined in the literature review, stigma can reduce this trust. Therefore, it appears that public-based stigma may influence their help-seeking behavior by reducing trust.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the inequalities of opportunity experienced by young people from low SES backgrounds and how these influence their help-seeking attitudes and behaviors. The findings reveal the complex interplay of social psychological factors influencing help-seeking strategies among low SES youth, resonating with Ungar's resilience model (2011). First, self-efficacy, optimism and resilience, in combination with perceptions of available environmental support, were identified as crucial factors in this process. Trust emerged as a key factor in shaping perceptions of available support, significantly influenced by stigma and peer relationships. Stigma-related challenges are likely affecting their trust in contextual support leading to the observed self-reliance. However, opportunities arise as these young people are embedded in strong peer networks serving as readily accessible and trusted mutual support systems, substituting for the need for formal support systems. In summary, the experience of growing up in a low SES neighborhood influences a complex

interplay of socio-psychological factors, ultimately leading to multiple help-seeking strategies. These conclusions led to the following key findings.

Drawing on Coffey and Farrugia's (2013) discussion of agency in youth studies, we can understand that while youth narratives emphasize individual agency, this perspective risks overlooking structural constraints. The stigmatized low SES neighborhoods with limited access to economic resources may lead youth to rely more on their psychological strength for effective coping. This could potentially exacerbate inequality within the low SES group (Doci, 2023). Those who possess individual strength and remain resilient are better equipped to effectively navigate or transform their support systems.

However, given previous research, it is also possible that adolescents aim to challenge stigmatizing narratives by creating counter-narratives (Marwick et al., 2017; Visser et al., 2023). They do this by focusing on the benefits of growing up in a low SES neighborhood, emphasizing their supportive peer networks and the role of individual power. This can be empowering on an individual level, but it can also contribute to a narrative of individualism that overlooks the importance of collective action and systemic change (Jefferey, 2012). This may reinforce the idea that individuals must rely solely on their psychological resources rather than seeking external support (Jeffrey, 2012).

Therefore, understanding the interplay between resources, agency, and individual attitudes is critical to understanding youth help-seeking (Keating & Melis, 2001). Scholars who focus solely on structural barriers when studying socioeconomic inequality may undermine individual strengths (Doci et al., 2023). However, focusing solely on individual capabilities will neglect those with lower levels of psychological capital. To prevent stigmatization, a balanced approach to research is needed that considers both structural factors and individual strengths. Therefore, youth researchers must be cautious about simplifying relationships or youth processes when conducting quantitative research (Visser et

al., 2023). It is therefore important to understand the social origins of psychological capital and how this influences environmental factors (Doci et al., 2023). The recognition of strong peer networks as an important source of support is a step forward in understanding the role of social relationships in shaping individuals' help-seeking strategies. But, resolving the issue further may be more complex than one might expect, given the following limitations.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be addressed in future research. First, due to ethical considerations and time constraints, sensitive issues related to racial discrimination could not be explored in depth. Discrimination based on gender and race is embedded in social structures and institutions, leading to disparities in access to resources and opportunities (Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Future research should more fully explore these sensitive issues, as they may have a significant impact on help-seeking behaviors among marginalized youth (Carter, & Forsyth, 2010).

Second, the current sample consisted almost entirely of youth with Moroccan or Dutch backgrounds. Additionally, almost all participants were recruited through youth workers in one specific neighborhood. Since youth workers provide social support that empowers youth, this recruitment method could lead to a biased sample and limited perspectives. In addition, gender norms and religious beliefs significantly influence how individuals cope with challenges and seek support (Perrigo et al., 2022; Saint Arnault, 2009). Therefore, future research should employ multiple recruitment strategies to ensure diversity in neighborhoods, genders, and cultures to increase the generalizability of findings.

In addition, an explanation for self-reliance and reliance on peer support may lie in the characteristics of adolescent development. This tendency can be correlated with the individuation process of adolescence, in which adolescents seek autonomy and independence

(Ellis et al., 2012; Pfefer et al., 2018). During adolescence, peer influence exceeds adult influence and youth seek more responsibility for themselves (Watson et al., 2021). This may discourage them from seeking necessary support as they feel capable of overcoming challenges independently. Future research using a longitudinal approach could provide a deeper understanding of how young people's experiences and help-seeking strategies evolve, revealing the effects of adolescent development.

Implications for Society

Given the specific developmental stage of adolescence and individual differences within a given context, perhaps youth themselves are the missing link. Therefore, this study does not imply specific policy recommendations but rather recommends asking, actively listening, and co-creating with low SES youth. When youth feel empowered, heard, respected, and included, they are better supported in navigating transitions and promoting empowerment and opportunity within their communities (Coburn, 2011; Nolas 2014). Youth-driven projects have been shown to better address youth support services within youth care (Wiljer et al., 2016). In this manner, youth participation should be made easily accessible by teaching and showing youth how to participate (UNICEF, 2022). Perhaps youth themselves are the missing link that will ensure that society can tap into the talents of all, not just the privileged.

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Appendix 1: Interdisciplinary reflection

The Use of Theoretical Insights from Multiple Scientific (Sub)disciplines

The integration of psychological and sociological theories significantly enhances the understanding of help-seeking behaviors among low-SES youth. Psychological theories, such as offer insight into individual traits and mental processes that influence behavior. Meanwhile, sociological theories provide a broader perspective on how social structures impact these behaviors. By combining these perspectives, the research uncovers the complex interplay between individual experiences and societal influences, leading to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the factors that affect help-seeking behavior.

Meaningful Disciplines and Their Contributions

The central research question benefits from the insights of psychology and sociology. Psychology delves into individual characteristics that determine behavior, such as self-efficacy and emotional resilience. Sociology, on the other hand, examines the influence of social contexts, including family, community, and institutional structures. These disciplines are essential as they collectively address both the personal and contextual dimensions of help-seeking behavior, revealing how individual agency and social constraints interact shaping outcomes.

Insights from Stakeholders Outside Academia

Youth workers offered practical insights that bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world application. Youth workers provide valuable information on the stigma experienced by low-SES youth. Their on-the-ground experience helps contextualize academic findings, ensuring that interventions are relevant and effective.

Legitimacy of a Monodisciplinary Approach

If an interdisciplinary approach is not feasible, a monodisciplinary approach can still be legitimate, especially when a specific aspect of the research question requires focused expertise. For instance, if the study aims to deeply understand the psychological processes influencing help-seeking behavior, a purely psychological approach might be appropriate. However, for a holistic understanding of help-seeking behaviors among low-SES youth affected by their context, which involves both individual and social factors, an interdisciplinary approach is needed.

Use of Multiple Scientific Research Methods

Employing multiple research methods, such as qualitative interviews and participation observation would have enhanced the understanding of the research problem. Participation observation could provide additional insights into the real-life contexts and environments in which help-seeking behaviors occur. Observing interactions and behaviors in natural settings helps in understanding the social dynamics and cultural norms that shape these behaviors. These would have enhanced the knowledge generated by qualitative interviews.

Use of Multiple Analytical Levels

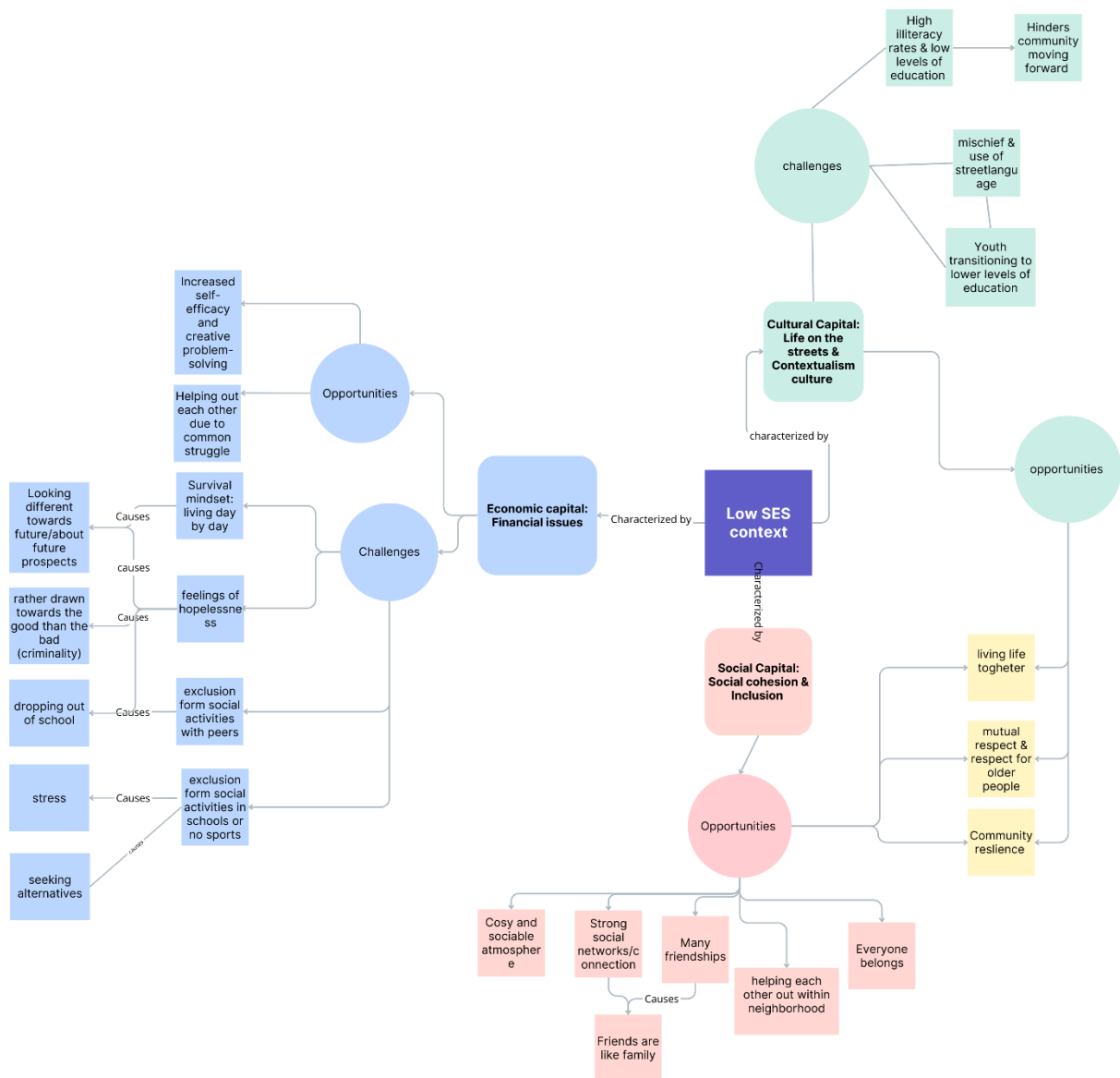
Analyzing the problem at multiple levels, such as individual experiences and broader social structures, leads to a deeper understanding. The systems perspective considers how individual behaviors are influenced by and interact with larger social systems. By examining both micro (individual) and macro (structural) levels, the study uncovered the complex dynamics that shape help-seeking behaviors. This joint analysis is meaningful as it highlights

the interplay between personal agency and structural constraints, offering comprehensive insights that can inform more effective interventions.

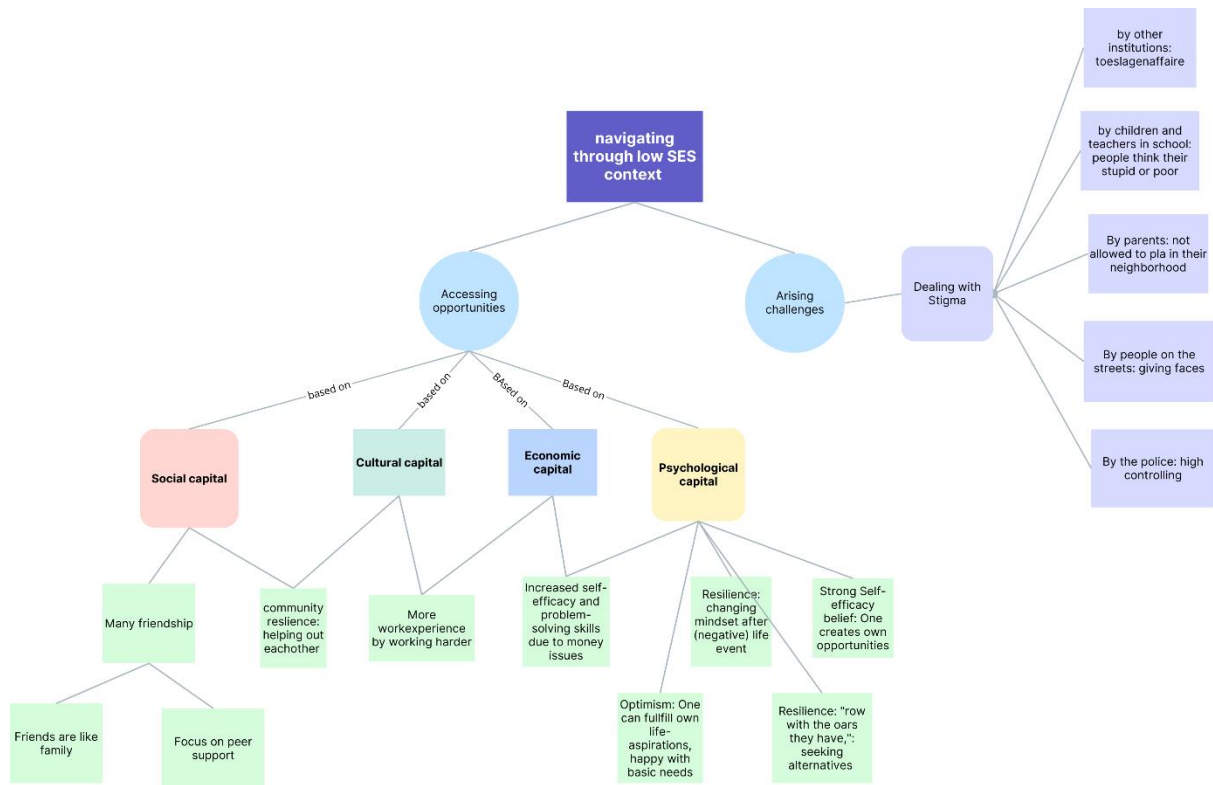
Appendix 2: Code trees

Code Tree 1

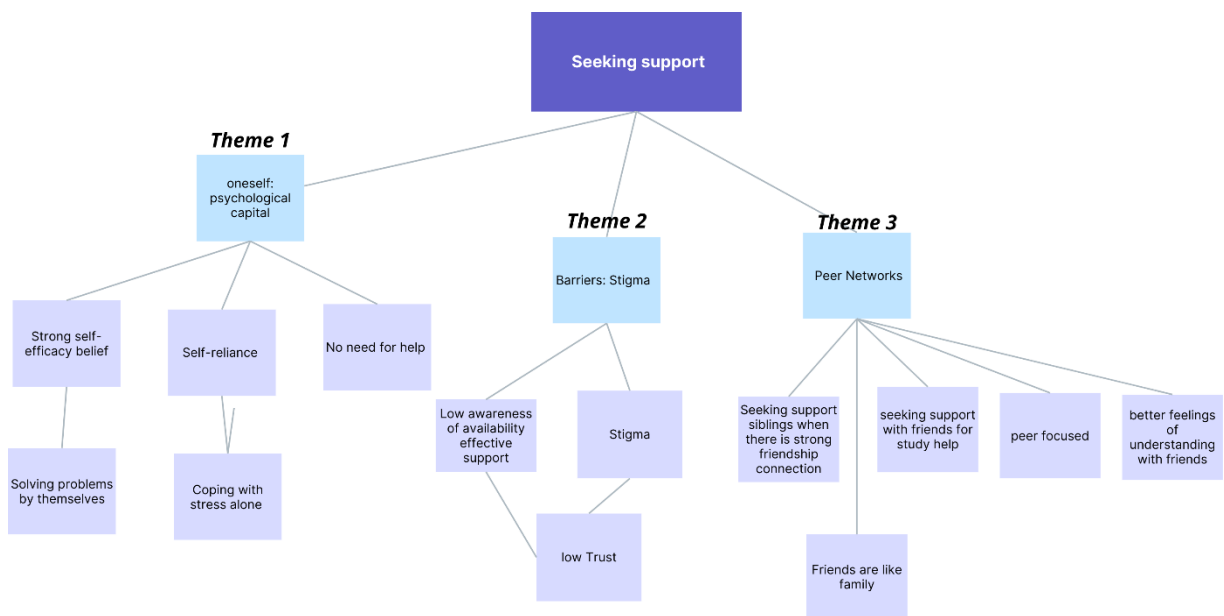
First round of open coding resulted in the following code tree. These codes were mainly inductive and were categorized as opportunities or challenges related to the neighborhood context. These are divided into the categories: economic capital, cultural and social capital.



Code tree 2: Second round of axial coding resulted in the following code tree. These codes were deductive codes.



Code Tree 3: Analyzing the axial codes in relation to help-seeking resulted in the three overarching themes: psychological capital (oneself), peer-networks (friends) and stigma



Appendix 3: Topic list Interviews

***Introductie + icebreaker**

***uitleg doel onderzoek**

*** informed consent procedure**

1. Kennismaking /Introductie over jezelf (identiteit)

- Naam, leeftijd, woonplaats, hoe en waar ben je opgegroeid etc. school of werk?

2. Doorvragen naar de ervaringen van opgroeien in de buurt/leefomgeving (cultuur in de wijk):

- Hoe vond je het om op te groeien in deze buurt?
- Op welke school zit je etc.? Hoe vind je het op school?

3. Vragen naar de voordelen (kansen) van opgroeien in jouw buurt (sociale connecties en sociale cohesie/inclusiviteit/cultuur in de wijk):

- Wat zijn de voordelen van opgroeien in jouw buurt?
- Kun je positieve ervaringen/herinneringen delen uit over je buurt?
- Welke kansen bracht dit met zich mee?

4. Vragen naar de nadelen (uitdagingen) van opgroeien in jouw buurt (minder geld, stigma etc.):

- Wat zijn de nadelen van opgroeien in jouw buurt?
- Kun je een negatieve ervaring/herinnering delen over je buurt?
- Welke uitdaging bracht dit met zich mee?

5. Vragen naar ongelijke behandeling/ervaren van ongelijkheid (stigma, discriminatie/vooroordelen):

- Denk je dat jouw kansen verschillen van anderen om je heen (verschillen van diegene binnen en buiten je buurt)?
- Heb je wel eens het gevoel gehad dat je ongelijk bent behandeld? Waarom? Wat doet dit met je?
- Wat zie je om je heen? Gebeurt dit ook bij vrienden of alleen bij jou?

6. Vragen naar sociaal jongerenwerk in de buurt of op school (weten over jongerenwerk/kijk op jongerenwerk):

- Heb je jongerenwerk bij jou in de buurt?

- Wat voor soort jongerenwerk is dit en waarvoor is dit?
- Ga je er wel eens naartoe? Waarom wel of waarom niet?
- Heb je vrienden of familie die er gebruik van maken? Waarom wel of waarom niet?

7. Vragen naar steun zoek gedrag (inzicht barrières en facilitators steun

zoekgedrag/vertrouwen):

- Als je steun/hulp zou zoeken voor een probleem, waar zou je dit dan doen? En waarom?

8. Vragen naar over efficiënte hulp: Als je jongeren in jouw buurt zou mogen helpen, en je hebt alle macht en de middelen, wat zou je dan doen?

Appendix 3: Informed consent



Universiteit Utrecht

Master (MSc) Youth Development and Social Change
Universiteit Utrecht

Naam studenten/onderzoekers:

Maureen van Buiten

Doel van het onderzoek:

Het verkrijgen van diepgaande informatie over de ervaringen van jongeren die opgegroeid zijn in een achterstandswijk, specifiek over kansenongelijkheid en steun zoeken bij jongerenwerk.

Je medewerking:

De gegevens van mijn onderzoek worden verzameld via interviews die zorgvuldig zullen worden behandeld. Dat betekent dat de gegevens anoniem worden verwerkt en dat niemand in het uiteindelijke verslag op voor derden herkenbare wijze zal worden beschreven. Daarnaast zal het interview opgenomen worden. Tijdens het interview heb je altijd de mogelijkheid om een vraag niet te beantwoorden, een pauze te nemen of te stoppen. De verkregen data uit dit interview zal gedeeld worden met Universiteit Utrecht. In de toekomst zou de data mogelijk gedeeld kunnen worden met andere onderzoekers die een gelijksoortig onderzoek willen uitvoeren.

Door dit document te ondertekenen ga je akkoord met je vrijwillige deelname aan dit onderzoek. Ook na ondertekening kan je nog altijd afzien van uw medewerking. Je deelname wordt echter zeer op prijs gesteld!

Ik geef toestemming voor deelname aan dit onderzoek,

Naam:

Plaats:

Datum:

Handtekening: