Young Adults and Social Connectedness:

An overview of learnings from our partnership with Apprentice of Peace Youth Organization

About the Partnership

In the spring/summer of 2022, Visible Network Labs and the Youth Social Support Fellows partnered with the Apprentice of Peace Youth Organization's (AOPYO) Young Adult Council (YAC). This partnership sought to better understand how young people thought about social connectedness, resources, and how social connectedness could help young people achieve their life goals. The partnership included feedback sessions between the fellows and YAC as well as 1) pilot testing of PARTNERme, a social connectedness measurement tool, and 2) a focus group. Here are some of the takeaways from that partnership.
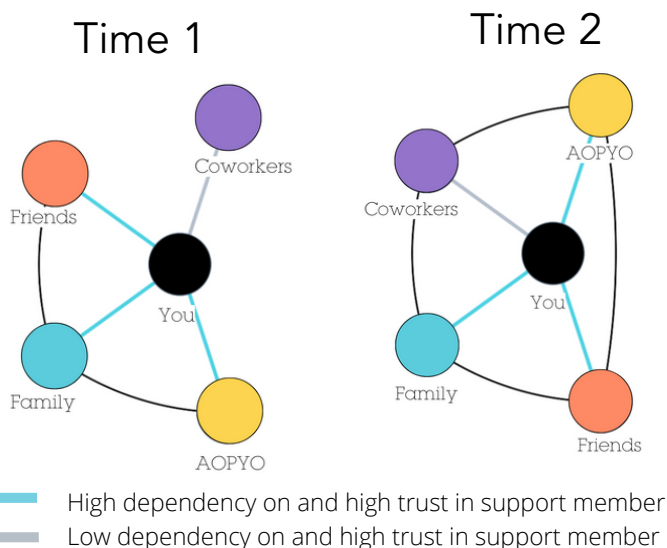
PARTNERme and Focus Groups

The focus group included seven youth participants from AOPYO. Due to technical issues and scheduling conflicts, not all participants stayed for the entire hour of the focus group.

AOPYO's YAC used PARTNERme, a screening and network analysis tool, in order to measure social connectedness. A pilot survey was distributed in April of 2022 (Time 1), and feedback from the pilot participants was then used to make improvements to the survey. Members of YAC then tested the survey tool again in June of 2022 (Time 2).

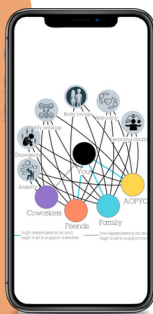- -

How do support networks change over time?

To give one example (out of many) about how networks can change over time, this person's network had more coordination among informal members and formal organizations at Time 2 as compared to Time 1. Specifically, the black lines in the maps indicate that members can work together when help is needed. From April to June, this YAC member perceived that more of the members of their support network could work together when they needed help or support.

Time 1

Time 2

High dependency on and high trust in support member
Low dependency on and high trust in support member

How are young adults' support networks currently helping them?

Understanding how young adults currently use their networks to help them address their social, emotional, and health needs can be valuable. For young adults themselves, it can provide an opportunity for personal introspection and insight. For youth-serving organizations, they may be better positioned to target and address needs. Simply being able to visualize or organize that information can help identify where gaps may exist and what they can do to address those gaps.

By allowing open-ended responses in the survey, young adults were able to **authentically express** the most central aspects of their identity. During the focus group, they described how meaningful it was to come up with their own responses (as opposed to selecting from a pre-populated list) and how important it is to be able to express the nuances of their identity.

Percent of Respondents Who Seek Support From...

Friends (47%)   Family (28%)

Combined survey results from Time 1 and Time 2 show that YAC members most often seek support from friends (47%) or family members (28%).

Authentic Expression

During the focus group, young adults expressed that they are often reluctant to reach out for help because they do not feel they have authentic and trusted relationships with others. They often do not expect others, or society, to be willing or able to help them with the things they need.

Social media, however, is seen as providing a way to escape and as a means of expressing oneself authentically. After one young man described online gaming as a way to not have to deal with the real world, another focus group member reflected:

"Social media plays a factor in that [too]. Social media allows people to be their true selves, whoever they are, whoever they want to be, and how they want to be that person."

How do we connect?

Some young adults expressed feeling comfortable making connections in person while others feel more comfortable in online forums and social media platforms. Focus group participants thought that some young people were limited by fear of rejection and not wanting to go out of their comfort zone. They acknowledged that for some, it can be difficult to cross that gap which can lead to a pessimistic outlook.

"Every time I try to make new friends, I always keep in mind that there is the possibility that they could do something negative or like stab me in the back and stuff like that. So what I do is I try to detach my emotions and I look at it objectively. If I really have to interact with these people, then this is the kind of mindset I have to be on. It comes down to deciding what you need and what you don't. Always in the back of my mind, you should be warned, these people are not to be trusted."

> "...if you're honest about who you are – you know the things you like and don't like – it makes it a lot easier to build a relationship with people who are similar to you and avoid relationships with people who are not similar to you."

Despite these negative experiences, young adults would advise other young people to get out of their comfort zone, be open to making new friends, and not to allow fear of rejection to stop them from trying new things. They suggested engaging with online groups where there are rules for conduct, which allows people to seek interaction and be themselves but also set some boundaries about how they would like to be treated.

Social media is often lacking with regard to cultivating conversational skills and picking up nonverbal cues, which focus group participants identified as barriers for forming online connections. These challenges, however, are not insurmountable if young people know themselves, know their needs, and are willing to go out of their comfort zone.

What did participants think of using technology to measure their social connectedness?

Young adults saw the utility of using technology to measure their social connectedness, revealing insights they had not seen before visualizing their networks with this tool [PARTNERme]. In particular, PARTNERme was seen as useful for high schoolers and other young adults who may not feel like they have anyone to talk to or not know where to go for help.

"[PARTNERme] did a good job of putting me on the spot and thinking truthfully [...] and [it was] a reality check of what my options are and being honest with myself. And it gave me ideas - thinking about things I probably hadn't thought about until I looked at [it]."

"[PARTNERme] made me comfortable enough to answer the questions."

When Measuring Social Connectedness...

- Some young people are equipped with resources that don't fit into predetermined categories. Tools that measure social connectedness may prompt young people to think of resources they already have that they can use.
- Consider open-ended options for young adults to described communities where they seek support that you may not have considered (e.g., gaming communities, exercising).
- Include social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Facebook, Instagram) in addition to in-person modes of forming relationships.
- Allow customization (e.g., avatars, colors, fonts) when possible so that young people can express unique aspects of their identity.

To find out more about young people and social connectedness:
https://visiblenetworklabs.com/social-support-research-fellowship/