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Jeff Zacharakis
Kansas State University

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Measuring Social Capital in Adult Education Projects

Jeff Zacharakis
Kansas State University

Keywords: Community development, leadership development, and social capital

Abstract: This theoretical research analyzes the measurement of social capital in adult education and community development projects that seek to strengthen democratic processes and develop local leadership. It analyzes two different methodologies—in depth interviews and Web-based questionnaires—used to measure social capital.

Introduction

This theoretical research analyzes the measurement of social capital in adult education and community development projects that seek to strengthen democratic processes and develop local leadership. While most of the intellectual discussion and case study research into social capital is occurring in the fields of community development, sociology, and political science, there is growing awareness of social capital's importance within adult education (Waites, 2005; Zacharakis & Flora, 2005). Conceptually, understanding and defining social capital is relatively straightforward. Measuring social capital is far more complex and requires creative latitude that reflects the community or organization you are working with rather than a set of rigid rules that are applied to all situations. This research reports on an analysis of two different methodologies—in depth interviews and Web-based questionnaires—used to measure social capital.

The theoretical void in adult education is the problem of measuring project impact and success. Social capital measurement allows the adult educator or community developer to identify barriers that limit the development of new leadership, and thereby develop strategies that encourage participation by new leadership. If strengthening social capital is a barometer of project success, then the question is “How do we measure social capital?” This paper is divided into three parts: (a) defining social capital relative to the adult education project of building community, (b) case-study literature on measuring social capital, and (c) an analysis to two methodologies to measure social capital used independently in two projects directed by the author. This research on analyzing these two methodologies is new.

Social capital is defined (The World Bank, n.d.) by communication and collective action within groups, organizations, or communities. It is based on trust, networks, and shared interests and values. Social capital can be invested and reinvested in the same way that financial, human, physical, and environmental capitals are invested. And social capital is inherently connected to these other forms of capital. For example, it is difficult to imagine how financial or environmental capital can grow without strong social capital. It takes time to develop social capital, yet it can be destroyed relatively quickly (Flora, 1997). While the assumption is that communities and organizations should strive to develop strong social capital, strong social capital can be either positive or negative (Zacharakis & Flora, 2005). Weak social capital is usually considered to be negative and strong social capital is usually positive, yet when social capital is too strong it can have a negative impact on a project.

Understanding Social Capital Relative to Adult Education

Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions that underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together (World Bank, n.d.).

Social capital facilitates coordination and cooperation. Bonding social capital, in particular, also has an important downside (Portes & Landolt, 1996). Communities, groups or networks that are isolated, parochial, or working at cross-purposes to society's collective interests (e.g., drug cartels and corruption rackets) can actually hinder economic and social development. A broader understanding of social capital accounts for both the positive and negative aspects by including both bonding and bridging ties between people and organizations. This view recognizes that bonding social capital is needed to give communities and organizations a sense of identity and common purpose, but also stresses that without "bridging" or "linking" ties that transcend various social divides (e.g. religion, ethnicity, and socio-economic status), bonding social capital can become a basis for the pursuit of narrow interests, and can actively preclude access to information and material resources that would otherwise be of great assistance to the community (e.g., tips about firms that might be recruiting and access to state and Federal grants). At the community level, high bonding capital means people know one another in multiple settings or roles (see Freudenberg's, 1986, concept of density of acquaintanceship; Granovetter's, 1973, strong ties, and Coleman's, 1988, concept of closure). Bridging social capital connects diverse groups within the community and involves building links to groups outside the community. Narayan (1999) explained it this way: 12

Primary social group solidarity (bonding social capital) is the foundation on which societies are built. The impact of primary social groups depends on their resources and power. But when power between groups is asymmetrically distributed, it is crosscutting ties, the linkages between social groups that are critical to both economic opportunity and social cohesion (p. 13).

Thus, not only are boundary maintenance and in-group/out-group notions incorporated into this dichotomy (see Young, 1970, for a fuller discussion of boundary maintenance), the concept of power is also introduced:

While primary groups and networks undoubtedly provide opportunities to those who belong, they also reinforce pre-existing social stratification, prevent mobility of excluded groups, minorities or poor people, and become the bases of corruption and co-optation of power by the dominant social groups. Crosscutting ties that are dense and voluntary, though not necessarily strong...help connect people with access to different information, resources and opportunities. (Narayan, 1999, p. 13)

Putnam's (1993) construct of social capital refers "to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital" (pp. 35-36). Coleman (1993) states that such informal norms "depend on a dense and relatively closed social structure

¹² Narayan (1999) distinguishes between *bridging* and *linking* social capital. Both bridging and linking social capital are crosscutting ties among groups that hold different values; the former are horizontal, and the latter are vertical, ties. We have included vertical ties within the concept of bridging social capital in order to emphasize the distinction between intimate, multipurpose (bonding) ties and instrumental, single-purpose, and non-redundant (bridging/linking) ties.

that has continuity over time” (p. 9). Only through interaction can trust reach sufficient levels to allow for the reduction of transaction costs. Thus, social capital can improve the efficiency of other forms of capital. In contrast, Bourdieu’s theory argues that class control begins with the exercise of symbolic power where the ruling class imposes a definition of society and its institutions that is consistent with its interests (1977). Both Bourdieu and Coleman suggest that—within limits—one form of capital can be turned into one another. According to Bourdieu (1986), dominant social classes can use their privileged access to social and cultural/human capital to make strategic conversion of one kind of capital to another in order to further solidify their class position. Likewise, he argues, dominant groups can use such capital conversion to transfer strategic advantage from one generation to the next (Bourdieu, 1986; see also Duncan, 1992, 1996).

Networks or linkages are the main mechanism through which trust is developed and reciprocity established. But networks and networking can serve to exclude as well as include, and to consolidate power as well as to share power (Bourdieu, 1986; Duncan, 1996). Networks are most effective for the community as a whole when they are diverse, inclusive, flexible, horizontal (linking those of similar status), and vertical (linking those of different status, particularly local organizations or individuals with external organizations and institutions that have resources not available within the community). Such a diversity of networks is facilitated when a community defines its boundaries broadly and flexibly. Thus, if there is need for inter-community collaboration, as in school consolidation or other service sharing, residents of another geographic community can be viewed as “one of us” rather than as an outsider.

The work of Highlander Folk School and The Lindeman Center, Northern Illinois University, are historical examples of using bridging (vertical) and bonding (horizontal) linkages to strengthen local capacity. One of the central strategies both Highlander and The Lindeman Center used to link disenfranchised groups was the use of residential workshops where participants could share their stories and develop friendships. Typically individuals attending these workshops were leaders of local action organizations in their communities. One goal at these workshops was to strengthen the collective action at the community level by creating new external networks. Vertical linkages strengthened local initiatives by connecting these disparate groups to each other and by opening access to university and other sources of expertise and prestige (Gaventa, 1980; Horton, 1989; Zacharakis-Jutz, Heaney & Horton, 1991). These workshops illustrate the intersection and interplay between horizontal and vertical linkages in social capital.

Measuring Social Capital

Measuring social capital is complex and problematic. In 1996 The World Bank (n.d.) launched the Social Capital Initiative to assess the impact of social capital on the effectiveness of its development projects. Recognizing that social capital was a key variable to project success, their goal was to develop indicators for monitoring and measuring social capital. The five indicators selected were: (a) effectiveness of groups and networks, (b) levels of trust in groups and networks, (c) the ability to generate collective action, (d) level of social inclusion, and (e) ability to share information and communicate within the group and with other groups and networks.

Antidotal evidence suggests that a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative instruments is most effective in measuring social capital (Grootaert and van Basterlaer, 2002). Both structured questionnaires and open-ended survey instruments are needed to effectively

measure social capital. Hence the research design includes a combination of meso and micro measurements, community and individual inputs, and structured and open-ended responses. Network structure and density (internal and external linkages) is most commonly measured, while in other examples norms, values and character of these networks are measured. Understanding how norms and values differ geographically or organizationally can explain how similar groups with similar network structures can behave so differently. In other words, “social capital in one context can be unsocial context in another” (Krishna and Shrader, 2004, p. 18).

Instruments used to measure social capital include: key respondent interviews, focus groups, community maps, organizational maps, and survey questionnaires. Membership in local associations and networks is an indicator of structural social capital. This a quantitative measures. Using key informant interviews, indicators of trust and adherence to norms can be measured qualitatively. Measuring collective action can be easily accomplished by conducting a historical scan of past projects and activities, using local newspapers, newsletter, annual reports, quantitative surveys, and qualitative interviews. Hence, a mixed methodology provides an accurate measure of a community’s or an organization’s social capital. While adult educators may be most interested in a group’s collective action potential, collective action is directly dependent upon the other indicators such as trust and membership in other associations and networks.

Two Midwestern Case Studies

Most efforts to measure social capital have taken place outside of the United States. This paper analyzes the instruments used to measure social capital in two projects in the United States. One project was a community of place, and the other a community of interest. Community of place is geographically determined (e.g., watersheds, cities, or neighborhoods), and community of interest can be political, social, cultural, or economic (e.g., professional organizations, political groups, or ethnic groups).

The core leadership network in a rural community was the first group that was analyzed using in-depth interviews. Thirty-three interviews, each lasting between 1-2 hours, were collected and analyzed. In this project, social capital was deemed to be too strong and exclusionary in nature. Leadership opportunities for citizens outside the core group of elite families were rare. Yet in every other category of social capital, this community measured extremely high, especially in the ability to generate collective action. More than a year was required in time and money to complete this project (Zacharakis & Flora, 2005).

A mixed methodology research instrument was used that was very similar to the approach described in the preceding section. Key informant interviews and historical scans of the local newspaper indicated that this community of 2500 people was able to successfully raise money and build a new library, city hall, school gymnasium as well as other less notable projects. An organizational scan of all major civic and community organizations and group indicated the core leadership group was relatively small and closed to outsiders and/or people who had moved to the community within the last few years. Key informant interviews portrayed the limitations of the core leadership group, which depended heavily on new residents to provide them vertical linkages outside the community, yet were allowed to be part of the core leadership group where major decisions were made. The key informant survey asked many questions, but there were four questions that provided the most clarity to the community’s level of social capital: (1) Who do you need in a project to make it successful, (2) who has the ability to kill a project, (3) who is most effective in implementing a project, and (4) who best represents the

community to the outside? This research indicated that the community was successfully able to invest in its future through local community development plans but had relatively weak external linkages. The research findings also suggested that even though there were many indicators that suggested strong social capital, there were also equally strong indicators for cultural and social reproduction of leadership and power. Therefore, in order to fully capitalize on the social capital the cultural reproduction would have to be mitigated (Zacharakis & Flora, 2005).

The second project was an analysis of public school leadership in Kansas. A sample of Kansas's public school superintendents was surveyed using a Web-based questionnaire. The rationale for using this methodology was the geographic dispersion of school leadership in a fundamentally rural state, the fact that most of these administrators were very busy and asking them to participate in a two-hour interview was unlikely, and the fact that every administrator in the state is wired to the Internet. This project was completed in four months and relatively inexpensive. Of the 291 superintendents, 163 returned valid questionnaires, for a response rate of 56%. The importance of this project was to anticipate what type of person would fill future vacancies (65-70% of all superintendents are projected to retire within the next 10 years). The role of public school leaders, especially in rural communities, is far more important than merely school administration as they find themselves actively involved in local community and economic development. Also, they represent an important opportunity to rural communities to recruit new leadership with new ideas and different life experiences. This web-based instrument included both quantitative questions using Likert scales, and qualitative questions using short-answer responses. The results of this project indicated that the new superintendents will most likely have spent their entire career within the state, and will have attended one of the Kansas' public universities. This closed recruitment process is in part dictated by the retirement and benefit packages, which are typically not portable from school district to district and state to state. It is also a reflection that local school boards are responsible for hiring teachers and administrators, and subconsciously they hire people with whom they are most comfortable, implying that they have the values and life experiences as the community. Again, as in the first case study, cultural reproduction of leadership potentially weakens rural community social capital where there is a need to attract new people with new ideas (Zacharakis, Miller, & Devin, 2005, 2006).

Both projects suggest that there is a strong tendency to reproduce existing leadership structures and attributes. In both of these projects the opportunity to develop entrepreneurial leadership that may be an asset to local community development is undermined when new leadership is not recruited outside existing leadership channels. This is not to say that the existing leadership is not effective or productive. Rather the opportunity is for new leadership to look with a fresh perspective at systemic problems. If this new leadership only evolves from the existing leadership pools, opportunities to bring new ideas and perspectives to local problems are seriously diminished.

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