

Defining social capital:

A brief overview of the key aspects
and debates

Abdullah Bayat¹

Project: Policy Management, Governance and Poverty Alleviation in the Western Cape

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4. analysing the interface between the state and civil society, aimed at establishing how ordinary citizens perceive the services delivered to them and ascertaining what they believe to be their entitlements and obligations as citizens.

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“It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” ²

Introduction

This paper introduces the concept and the main ideas concerning social capital. The paper is not an exhaustive attempt at covering all that social capital is but rather to serve as a platform for discussion from which some of the key ideas of social capital can be distilled.

What is social capital? Social capital refers to networks of relations linking individuals for mutual benefit.

The basic idea of social capital is that an individual’s relationships with family, friends and associates constitute an important asset, which can be leveraged for material gain (Woolcock, 2001). Why are we interested in the concept of social capital? Social capital holds out the promise of improving access to resources among and across different groups of people. We are interested in social capital because we consider it a new way of thinking about how resources can be mobilised and distributed (and possibly more equitably distributed) within society. Another reason is that it allows us to broaden the debate around issues such as community development and public policy in a comprehensive framework that includes economic, political and social considerations.

In this paper the various definitions of social capital of the early scholars on the topic are examined. Thereafter the various approaches that researchers adopt in defining this concept are explored. Trust, one of the most important features of social capital, is then singled out for analysis. The three types of social capital, bonding, bridging and linking are defined and clarified. The following critical debates are highlighted. Firstly, the levels of analysis of social capital, secondly issues of causality in the social capital debate and thirdly issues of power. For practical application the various measurement dimensions of social capital

are listed. The critical role of the state is also emphasized and discussed. In the conclusion an overview of the paper is given with some recommendations.

That our aims are for an equitable society means that we see social capital as a framework for change, specifically in and among the poor communities in the Western Cape and in South Africa at large.

One of the main questions that we are attempting to shed light on is how can social capital be defined and used as an analytical tool in public policy in South Africa. It is the authors' hope that this paper will open the door for discussion around the use of policies and programmes and other resources for the generation and formation of social capital across the racially segmented communities in South Africa.

Defining social capital

Social capital is a relatively new concept. Scholars from diverse backgrounds have researched it and as a result, there are many different definitions that reflect the discipline and background of the researcher. Social capital brings together three major disciplines: sociology, political science and economics (Anheier and Kendall 2000; Szreter, 2000).

The different approaches of sociologists and economists can be characterised as follows: Economists focus on individual actors with freedom of action who make rational self-interested calculations in the market. Sociologists view actions as part of a collective, constrained by social structure, motivated by non-rational feelings, traditions and values, occurring throughout the society (Swedberg, 1991). Social capital is an attempt to bridge the two disciplines and to move beyond the hegemony of one particular perspective in public policy debate. Social capital sends a key message that culture and community are intrinsic to economic and human development (Fukuyama, 1995). From the political science perspective, social capital may/can be used to describe the

underlying relationships which give rise to civil society.³ Thus, it brings together a single explanation for the functioning of markets, government and social development (Kilby, 2002).

The following are some of the key definitions of social capital. Bourdieu (1986: 249) says that “the volume of social capital possessed by a given agent ... depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize”

Another early scholar of social capital, Coleman (1988: 98), defines social capital in terms of what it does rather than what it is. For him “(s)ocial capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors-whether persons or corporate actors-within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible.” He is of the opinion that in contrast to other capitals, social capital inheres in the structure of relations between actors not with the individuals. He further proposes that social capital takes three forms – obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms.

Another key definition of social capital is the idea that there are “features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995: 67). Included in this definition are family relationships, kinship networks, friendships, acquaintances, civic attachments and institutional ties (Stone et al, 2002).

“Despite [their] differences, all three [definitions] consider that social capital consists of personal connections and interpersonal interaction, together with the shared sets of values that are associated with these contacts.” (Field, 2003: 13). One of the differences between these definitions is that Bourdieu focuses on the individual while Putnam’s perspective is more focused on the group.

As can be seen from the above, social capital is often defined as a sociological variable, i.e. referring to the relationships between people. Thus, the 'level' or 'stock' of social capital depends on "the quality of the set of relationships of a social group" (Szreter, 2000: 57). From this perspective social capital is thus relational, not something owned by any individual, but rather something shared in common. It is considered a type of social glue or lubricating agent in association with other resources. However, there is a perspective that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in networks or other social structures (Portes, 1998). Thus, it is possible to distinguish 'individual' and 'group' social capital. Individual social capital can be defined as "the set of social attributes possessed by an individual—including charisma, contacts and linguistic skill—that increase the returns to that individual in his or her dealings with others" (Glaeser, 2001). Community-level 'group' social capital is defined as the set of social resources of a community that increases the welfare of that community (Glaeser, 2001).

Trust is a major feature of social capital. Some researchers exclude trust as an element in the definition of social capital (since they consider it an outcome of social capital), defining social capital as "the norms and networks [within society] that facilitate collective action" (Woolcock, 1998: 155). Others, however, consider it an essential part of social capital (Uslaner, 1999). For them, social capital primarily reflects a system of values, particularly social trust. Most definitions incorporate both aspects in that social capital is both a value held (i.e. trust) and a network. Patulny (2004) adds a third dimension. He states that the practices such as volunteering to be part of the local neighbourhood watch should also be included in the definition of social capital. He substantiates this by citing Putnam et al's (1993) use of time-use data to measure social capital. However, the relationship between trust, networks and social capital practices has not been clearly demarcated. This is an area that requires more research.

Another key point is that the benefits of social capital to a particular individual or society can be both positive and negative. There are researchers who imply that social capital has only beneficial consequences. Several researchers have alluded to the 'dark' side of social capital, as observed in the operation of gangs and gangsters. However, any ascribed beneficial or detrimental aspect of social capital will depend on the perspective of the observer and those whose interests are being served (Pantoja, 1999).

The notion of social capital has some resonance with the traditional South African 'norms of reciprocity' of 'ubuntu'. Ubuntu is a conceptualisation of humanness that means, "I am because you exist". It is seen as an expression of community life and collective responsibilities and invokes notions of caring for and sharing with each other (Maluccio et al, 1999). This existing norm is a potential lever for generating beneficial social capital within South Africa. On the other hand one can also say that the corruption and cronyism reported about in the local and national media of politicians and state employees can also be a result of the 'dark' side of social capital.

Social capital has also been subject to criticism. It has been said to be "a notion riddled with contradictions" (Fine, 2001: 156). Among the chief criticisms is that it is only a buzzword with little empirical support, having a lack of definitional clarity, problematic measurement issues (such as aggregation, measurement over time, causality, dependence on context) and the huge diversity of fields that use it (Portes, 1998; Baron et al, 2000; Fine, 2001; Woolcock, 2001).

These negative aspects can be contrasted with the positive aspects (as stated by Baron et al, 2000), which include the following:

- it re-inserts issues of value into the heart of social scientific discourse;
- social capital has a heuristic role as well as analytic and prescriptive roles; and
- it shifts the focus of analysis from the behaviour of individuals

to the pattern of relations between agents, social units and institutions, placing the activities of individuals within the social domain.

Trust

What is meant by trust? It is the understanding that people or members of social groups will act in a manner that is mutually beneficial and that the norms of interaction and reciprocity established by the relationship will ensure that the members adhere to these norms. In other words, trust exists in this situation because obligations are enforceable, not through recourse to law but through the power of the community (Portes, 1998).

There is some confusion as to the relationship between trust and social capital. Some authors equate trust with social capital (Fukuyama, 1995), while others see it as a source of social capital (Putman et, 1993). Some even consider it an outcome of social capital (Woolcock, 1998). However, trust is conceptually distinct from social capital. According to Adler and Kwon, (2000) trust is a psychological state of individuals whereas social capital is a characteristic of social structure.

Two types of trust are identified in the literature: generalised and particularised. The former is based on norms and beliefs about society in general and the latter is based on information and rational choices about the nature of a particular individual or group. According to Uslaner (1999) only the former is considered a form of social capital. However, it seems plausible to compare particularized trust with bonding social capital and bridging social capital with generalised trust (Uslaner, 1999).

Social capital can be viewed from two angles, namely the structural dimension, which facilitates social interaction, and the cognitive and attitudinal dimension, which predisposes people to act in a socially ben-

official way. Trust belongs to the latter. These two parts work interactively and are mutually reinforcing.

Social capital allows individuals, groups and communities to resolve collective problems more easily. Collective action involves the use of norms of trust and networks in situations where individuals might otherwise be reluctant to be co-operative or socially engaged. Thus, norms of reciprocity and networks help ensure compliance with collectively desirable behaviour. In the absence of trust and networks ensuring compliance, individuals tend not to co-operate because others cannot be relied on to act in a similar way. Many social scientists refer to such co-ordination problems by various terms, including 'the prisoner's dilemma' or the 'free-rider problem' (Côté, 2001). This differs from community to community.

In a racially diverse country like South Africa, the challenge from a macro perspective is how to create a universal generalised trust, i.e. a common set of relationships between the different race groups of South Africans. Among traditional Africans in South Africa, *stokvel* savings institutions are prevalent whereas the white population uses banks, financial institutions and instruments. This is because each group generally trusts its own institution and respects the norms and values that underpin its operation. In other words, they exhibit personalised trust. How does one get whites to increase their generalised trust of blacks or vice versa if the racial communities are still geographically separate as a result of the effects of the Group Areas Act? How is generalised trust generated among dispersed, heterogeneous groups who seldom interact except in limited economic transactions and whose generalised trust is being continually eroded by the portrayal in the media of blacks as criminals and whites as being self-centred and always moaning about their lost privileges? The effects of stereotyping play a major role in the level of generalised trust.

Bonding, bridging and linking social capital

One of the key ideas of social capital is that of relationships and the value that is embedded in them. Three types of relationships are identified. The first type of relationships is highly personalised, which results in bonding social capital. The second type of relationships are more impersonal and horizontal, which is described as bridging capital (Woolcock and Narayan (2000); Putnam (2000)). Bonding social capital represents the construction of social networks with those like us (intra-group ties), whereas bridging social capital denotes the construction of such networks with those unlike us (extra-group networks).

The bonding networks come together around numerous social domains but occur more within the close networks of family and friends. They can also be compared to Granovetter's (1985, cited in Szreter, 2000) 'strong' ties, whereas bridging capital corresponds with his 'weak' ties. The bridging network is characterised by generalised trust and charitable volunteering action since it refers to those relationships on the outer perimeter, such as being part of a community forum or neighbourhood watch.

The primary bonding network is the family unit, though other social domains represent potentially distinct bonding networks, whether formal (work/professional, religion, union member) or informal (family, friends). Each network is characterised by its own distinctive forms of internal trust, driven in turn by values and voluntary efforts peculiar to/on behalf of the network. In addition, each network has a potential confounding or reinforcing effect upon the others. While social capital is relational, its influence is most profound when relationships are among heterogeneous groups i.e. when there is bridging social capital (Narayan and Cassidy, 2001).

The third type of relationship is a (vertical) relationship between heterogeneous social groups, which is known as linking social capital.

Linking social capital is characterised by the connections between those with differing levels of power or social status e.g. links between the political elite and the general public or between individuals from different social classes (Woolcock, 2001). The capacity by the community to leverage resources, ideas and information from formal institutions outside and beyond the community is a key function of linking social capital.

If we start seeing relationships as important for the formation of the various forms of social capital then we need frameworks and a place of gathering (conceptually, culturally and physically) where we can foster these relationships.

We also need to encourage social capital generation by the state and civil society. An example of the intervention by the state is the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry, which takes an active approach to the generation of social capital in developing Japanese industries, whose phenomenal success is well documented. They bridge and link the various companies within industry. Trade organisations like the South African Chamber of Commerce (Sacob) and the various professional associations can generate social capital at a meso level by acting as arenas for bridging, bonding and linking social capital. Organisations are fertile areas for social capital formation (Adler and Kwon 2002). Many articles have been written about the dynamics of social capital within organisations (see the volume *Knowledge and Social Capital* edited by Eric Lesser 2000).

Level of analysis

Social capital has been categorised as both an individual and a community attribute. As an individual attribute, it refers to a person's potential to activate and effectively mobilise a network of social connections based on mutual recognition and maintained by symbolic and material

exchanges (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital as an attribute of society is a quality of the networks and relationships that enable individuals to cooperate and act collectively (Putnam et al, 1993).

Social capital can be viewed as operating at various levels. The levels at which social capital can be analysed include the micro, (individual/household/neighbourhood) (Bourdieu, 1986), meso, as in institutions and organisations (Adler and Kwon, 2002), or macro, as in nations, states, rule of law, civil and political liberties (Grootaert, 1999; Patulny, 2004).

At a macro level, social capital deals with government effectiveness, accountability and the ability to enforce rules fairly. It also includes economic growth in terms of enabling the development of domestic firms and markets and encouraging or discouraging foreign investment. Thus, when the office of the Minister of Agriculture and Land Affairs, Thoko Didiza, recently mooted plans to limit foreign property ownership in South Africa, (*Business Day*, 2004), she was illustrating that government was thinking of re-regulating the (structure of the) property market, implicitly saying that government was upholding property rights and law and order. This regulation by the state is what makes vibrant civil societies and trust possible (Levi, 1996). This example illustrates dynamic nature of the relationship and that it changes over time. It also illustrates the power of the state as the government is able to amend the 'rules' and the norms.

Some researchers have analysed social capital in terms of what can be observed and those features of social capital that operate within the consciousness of those in the network. Uphoff (2000) identifies two forms of social capital. The first is 'structural social capital', which refers to relatively objective social structures such as networks, associations and the rules and procedures they embody. The second form, known as 'cognitive social capital', encompasses more subjective intangible elements such as generally accepted attitudes and norms of behav-

our, shared values, reciprocity and trust. Cognitive capital refers to aspects such as values, norms and behaviour that impact on trust, while the structural capital refers to the activities, organizational structure and democratic principles that underpin collective action and decision making (Krishna and Shrader, 1999).

Causality and social capital

Another important debate about social capital is the direction and degree of causality. There are three contending frameworks in the research on social capital. The first is the social capital thesis (claiming substantial cause on behalf of social capital), which signifies that social capital is an independent variable which leads to better economic gains and better governance (Putnam et al,1993). The second is the structuralist or institutionalist position (Coleman, 1988) (asserting causal priority for structures and claiming social capital to be a residual effect of structures). This indicates that social capital is endogenous, dependent and a by product of the institutional context. The third is the intermediate position (implying contingent causal value) (Krishna, 2002). Krishner (2002) has found that social capital matters for development, for communal harmony, and for democratic participation. But it matters even more when is activated and made productive through the intervention of capable agents.

Power and social capital

It is claimed that social capital is a public good and that everyone in society has access to it (Putnam et al, 1993). This position has been criticized. Portes and Landolt (1996) state that, like any other resource, social capital should be defined independently of the use to which it is put. Thus, social capital can have negative or positive outcomes. As a consequence, it follows that social capital can be unfairly positive for some and negative for others, depending on the balance of power.

There has been a paucity of research on the issue of power within social capital research. A lack of consideration of power as an important shaping feature of social capital might lead us to advocate horizontal associations while neglecting vertical relationships.

Social capital can be used to help explain the emergence and persistence of power relationships and provides a constructive base for doing something about it (Baron et al, 2000; Woolcock, 2001).

The role of the state

The state is seen as either a generator of social capital (Levi, 1996) or as not much of a contributor to it (Woolcock, 1998). Skocpol (1996) argues for a central role for the state in generating social capital. Maloney, Smith and Stoker (2000) argue that the state has a substantial role in creating the conditions for social capital. Evans (1996) considers the state's contribution to social capital as general and from a distance. For some, the state is better able to destroy social capital than to promote it (Fukuyama, 1995). The destruction caused to social capital with the forced removals brought about by the Group Areas Act under the previous regime is a South African example of how the state can destroy social capital.

To build social capital effectively, local government must share decisions with citizens, shifting its emphasis from controller, regulator and provider to new roles as catalyst, convener and facilitator (Warner, 2001). However, we must not oversimplify the role of the state because the state has many faces (departments, institutions, police and social services) and they influence and impact upon social capital in different ways.

What are the implications of social capital for government policy? There are a range of ways in which government might look at promoting the accumulation of social capital for beneficial purposes at the individual, community and national level.

At the individual level, the available levers include:

- greater support for families and parenting;
- mentoring;
- new approaches to dealing with offenders; and
- volunteering.

At the community level, the available levers include:

- promoting institutions that foster community;
- community IT networks;
- new approaches to the planning and design of the built environment;
- dispersing social housing; and
- using personal networks to pull individuals and communities out of poverty.

At the national level, the available levers include:

- community service learning in schools;
- community credit schemes; and
- measures to facilitate mutual trust.

Social capital and measurement

How does one measure social capital? Some researchers, such as Solow (1995) have questioned whether social capital is measurable. There is a general agreement that, at least at this stage, the measurement of social capital can only be done indirectly and by proxy. Depending on its definition, different proxy measurements are used. However, in most cases the measurement of various levels and dimensions of trust and associational activity is used (Matjo, 2002). Many researchers have used existing quantitative panel data and regression techniques to formulate social capital indices.

While there is high consistency in the definitions of social capital at a general level, including the forms and dimensions it embraces, at an operational level the interpretations of what social capital is and is not

are diverse. Correspondingly, methods used to measure social capital are varied, reflecting the diversity of its interpretations. Paxton (1999), for example, noted the wide gap between the concept of social capital and its measurement. This gap has led researchers to question its reliability due to its spread across fields and the discord in its measurement. This is a major problem, not only when conducting research, but also when citing and developing research. A definition of social capital suitable for rigorous empirical work must identify observable variables that can be used as proxies for social capital and is still in the making.

When it comes to measurement, a number of domains are typically identified (Putnam, 2000). These include:

- *community engagement*: various types of social networks and volunteering effort;
- *community efficacy*: a shared sense of empowerment and capacity to effect change at the community level;
- *volunteering*: typically understood as the voluntary commitment of unpaid time and effort outside immediate family for the benefit of others;
- *political participation*: patterns of active citizen engagement, voting etc.;
- *informal social support networks*: including their structure, density, size and composition by age, class, gender, ethnicity etc. (e.g. who knows who);
- *informal sociability*: regularity of social contact with others (speaking, visiting, writing, emailing);
- *norms of trust and reciprocity*: mutual 'credits', expectations and obligations as well as sanctions against opportunistic or anti-social behaviour (also understood as the formal or informal social 'rules' that guide how network members behave towards each other); and
- *trust in institutions*: public, corporate, voluntary.

In the economic literature the extent of household membership in various groups has been used to proxy the household's stock of social capital (for example, see Narayan and Pritchett, 1997 and Grootaert, 1999).

The above dimensions indicate the variety of features of social life that constitute social capital.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to draw on some of the key debates and ideas within the social capital literature. The paper shows the various dimensions of the definition of social capital. Social capital is concerned with relationships and trust and with how people interact over time and institutionalise certain norms of behaviour. Social capital encompasses both formal and informal relationships and networks including volunteer organisations, clubs and civic associations. A key point that emerges is that social capital should be thoroughly researched so that issues of definition and meaning can be clarified before measurement tools are developed and programmes and policies are implemented. In this way, we will be better placed to identify the types of social capital formation that should be fostered in the heterogeneous communities in South Africa.

In the introduction the question was asked: how can social capital be used as an analytical tool in public policy formulation? The paper has answered this by identifying social capital as a concept that is capable of being used at the level of the individual as well as at that of society. Three types of social capital were identified, namely, bonding, bridging and linking, of which bridging and linking are the most relevant to the South African context. Trust is the most cited dimension of social capital and is the glue that keeps the relationships intact. Issues of power have been generally neglected in the social capital literature

but should not be neglected in practice. Causality has been a major confounding aspect of the social capital debate, although it can be sufficiently be shown that social capital leads to social, political and economic benefits. Issue of measurement have been recognised as a major source of contention and consternation within the social capital debate. In conclusion, the role of the state has been pinpointed as a crucial creator and generator of social capital. The role of the state as a generator of social capital has been mentioned. Within the South African context the state is a crucial contributor to the formation of social capital because of the legacy of apartheid, as well as a potential destroyer of it because of the corruption among officials and politicians, which is undermining confidence and trust in the state.

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Endnotes

- 1 Abdullah Bayat, Department of Management, UWC.
- 2 This sums up much of the conventional wisdom regarding social capital (Woolcock, 2001).
- 3 If 'civil society' describes the non-governmental institutional arrangements of society in governance (Kilby, 2002).