



## Social capital

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### 1 Definition

In the broadest sense social capital reflects the idea of resources rooting in relations between individuals resp. in the embeddings of people in groups, associations, communities and even societies. A central assumption is that social capital - as a resource - is emerging from the quality of these relationships. This quality may be described in a more materialistic sense because these relations open up access to specific resources or assets. But it may also be imbued with valuated connotations, in particular referring to the essential contribution of networks and trust in promoting well-being, a sense of belonging and decency as individuals in entities blessed with social capital are pretended to engage in mutually beneficial collective actions. Therefore social capital applies to peoples' shared expectations, norms, values, and beliefs, their commitments to each other and eventually their associative capacities to knit the 'social fabric'.

### 2 Main Issues

It seems to be obvious that the social processes and figurations captured by the notion of 'social capital' – and its conceptual cousins such as 'community cohesion', 'associationalism', and 'engagement in civil society' etc. - are major concerns of the Social Work project\*. As Social Work realises a combination of educational and social-ecological interventions, it refers to resources that are personally as well as inter-personally bounded: their value is dependent on the dynamics of the contexts, embeddings, settings or fields in which they are situated. Therefore, Social Work might be understood as a human service profession which focuses "on individuals' relationships with others, their ties and interdependencies. [...] It] gives priority to the bonds and conflicts between people, and to how moral ties and dilemmas, and the co-operative and competitive aspects of groups and communities, both constrain and enable individuals" (Jordan 2003: 4). This constraining and enabling forces of (not) being enmeshed in particular groups and communities already refers to the main idea of social capital.

Social capital is not a new concept, but was actually used on and off during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The (obscure) rural educator Lyda J. Hanifan mentioned it in the 1910s, the economist Yoram Ben-Porath in the 1930s, the social-psychologist John R. Seeley in the 1950s and Jane Jacobs famously used it in the 1960s to describe 'public characters' being blessed with social capital and thus capable to prevent urban decline. However - as a metaphor encompassing the very basics of social scientific thought - it is also convincing to locate the roots of social capital much further back. There are indeed striking similarities to Marx and Engels' notion of 'bounded solidarity', Durkheims' 'value introjection', the

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Weberian idea of 'enforceable trust' and Simmels' concept of 'reciprocity transactions'. One thing these conceptions seem to have in common is that they point to the value added form of social associations. This might be considered as one of the ultimate reason for social scientific thinking.

Against this background the social capital concept points to at least two basic implications about the nature of human life conduct in social life:

1. that social embeddings and ties as well as memberships in particular communities constitute individual and/or collective assets that create more capacities, (mutual) advantages and opportunities than each individual would have had alone. And
2. that the resources people can access, the norms and values they hold, the attitudes they cultivate are all the result of and do result in mutual and socially negotiated relationships.

A further notable feature of the concept of social capital is a mostly somewhat over-optimistic focus on *functions*, more precisely on the mutual effects that particular virtues and habits of actors have on the constitution of wider social entities. And vice versa it stresses the benefits of communities on the people belonging to them: The nature of a community, a city or a whole nation – may it be in cultural, moral, political or economic terms – is considered to be shaped by the extent and the intensity to which its members have trustful relations, a shared sense of identity, hold similar values and reciprocally do beneficial things for each other: a civic society is nurtured by civic citizens. Similarly however, it is also suggested that the existence of a vibrant and functioning social fabric has not only great benefits for the actors within it but tends to shape the quality of their doings and beings: civic citizens therefore are nurtured by a civic society. Not despite but rather because of their circular nature such arguments and epistemologies are scientifically, practically and politically seductive as they are always right.

### **3 Critical Placement**

Probably one of the main reasons why the idea of social capital has only come into popular use since the early 1990s might be an at least implicit recognition of a major theoretical weakness and practical failure of both: the methodological individualism in the neo-classical anthropology of the 'homo economicus' as well as the neo-liberal 'market model' of governing human life conduct and society as a whole. Not later than the 1990s an increasing unease in advanced liberal regimes becomes apparent to go on pretending that 'there is no such thing as society' (M. Thatcher): marked failures, social disturbance and the inability to create a stable and coherent formation based upon the idea of market alone notoriously circumstantiate the 'annoying fact' (R. Dahrendorf) of 'such a thing'. Thus society was politically reinvented, reinvented in terms of social capital promising to be the missing link.

However, visions of social egalitarianism seem to have moved beyond the realm of the thinkable and the welfare state discursively dropped out of eligibility. Thus scientists, politicians, practitioners and even activists were keen to fill the vacuum with the notion of social capital as the silver bullet against the social ills (e.g. poverty, anomy, crime, etc.) of a Darwinist 'egoism' and 'possessive individualism' and as an allegedly non-ideological base for a renewed and modern narrative of 'the Social'. Major sources of its attraction may be:

1. that it focuses on the positive consequences of inter-subjective sociability and community while putting aside its less attractive features and
2. that it calls attention to nonmonetary forms of power and subsequently attracts the interest of policy-makers, city planners and social administrators seeking less costly, non-economic solutions to social problems (vgl. Portes 1998).

More generally William Walters (2002: 378) argues that “social capital is one of several ways in which the division between the social and the economic is being disrupted and redefined. Social capital points to new ways of making society calculable and governable, for instance, in terms of the way in which it seeks to quantify the associability and civic orientation of groups and even nations. It points away from a strategy of government that understands society as an all-encompassing social system”.

#### **4 Perspectives**

However the social capital concept may also be applied as a useful tool for analysing social inequalities. In this sense it may enlighten the socially unequal embeddings of people and the unequal (dis)advantages people get out of these relations. It may show how people associate selectively and thus reproduce social stratification: Dominant actors are able to secure and monopolize their access to power and assets on the cost of others by means of social closure. This view is closely related with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. But nevertheless an overoptimistic and normative use of social capital pretending to be a collective social good holds the danger to camouflage exactly these inequalities and replace the concept of social justice. This risk seems to apply especially to neo-communitarian approaches closely related to the name Robert D. Putnam defining social capital as „features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit” (Putnam 1993: 36). Thus Franklin (2003: 351) may be right in describing the central differences as such: „Putnam is less concerned with vertical inequalities and more interested in building and preserving the networks of social relations governed by norms and values which underpin the society that Bourdieu criticises. For Bourdieu, the idea of social capital is a cog in the social wheel, whereas for Putnam social capital is the wheel since it is the driving force behind social, political and economic life“.

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