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Unraveling the Complexities of Social Capital: A Comprehensive Review

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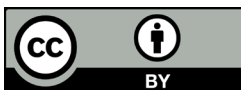
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Abstract

Social capital plays a crucial role in development. It facilitates cooperation among individuals and groups. This is particularly significant in rural areas of developing countries where access to productive capital is limited, thereby impeding the improvement of livelihoods. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that social capital can have both favorable and unfavorable effects. Studying social capital is therefore imperative in order to develop a conceptual understanding and harness its positive benefits. This paper presents a comprehensive review of the literature on social capital. It systematically summarizes and organizes relevant information from various publications to achieve a comprehensive understanding of this complex concept. Social capital encompasses multiple dimensions, forms, and levels. It is increasingly recognized as a valuable asset for development. Nonetheless, its effectiveness in promoting development is subject to debate due to issues such as unequal access and potential adverse outcomes. A thorough understanding of social capital is indispensable to devising effective policies and guiding development interventions. This understanding will help in determining the most effective forms and dimensions of social capital, while mitigating its negative repercussions.



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Introduction

The significance of social capital in development is widely acknowledged. Development is a primary objective pursued by individuals, communities, and societies in order to enhance living standards. However, there are several challenges associated with this endeavor. Recently, the use of local human and social resources has emerged as a crucial aspect of development (Lillbacka, 2006). These resources form the foundation of social capital (Van Emmerik, 2006). Social capital fosters relationships among individuals and groups, enabling them to reciprocate emotional, instrumental, and informational support (Song, 2011) in order to achieve their goals by facilitating cooperation (Kherallah & Kirsten, 2002). Consequently, harnessing social capital is essential for improving socioeconomic conditions and achieving successful development (Khatri & Timsina, 2023). Social capital and social support are interconnected aspects of social life. People in developing countries, particularly those in rural areas, such as farmers, agricultural labourers, and rural craftsmen, require social support as they face the challenge of limited productive capital to improve their livelihoods (Johar, 2016).

Similar to any form of capital, social capital can have both positive and negative consequences (Macbeth et al., 2004). Conflicting goals and interests among network members can undermine consensus and make collective efforts towards achieving goals difficult (Akdere & Roberts, 2008). Therefore, studying social capital is important in order to gain a conceptual understanding of the concept and utilize it for positive benefits while also considering negative externalities.

Objective and Methodology

The main objective of this paper is to review the literature around the concept of social capital in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the concept. This paper is based on a review of secondary literature from various publications. A systematic review of the literature was undertaken by collecting, summarizing, and logically organizing the relevant information.

Findings and Discussion

Meaning and Definition of Social Capital

The concept of 'social capital' originated from the notion of 'capital' in economics (Wang et al., 2020). Lyda Judson Hanifan first used the term in 1916 to highlight the importance of community engagement in schools (Smith & Kulynych, 2002). The term was popularized in development literature during the 1980s by influential academics like Pierre

Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam. Bourdieu characterized social capital as the totality of the available or potential resources associated with having a strong network of mutually recognized and acquainted relationships that are somewhat institutionalized (Glanville & Bienenstock, 2009). Bourdieu perceived social capital as an individual's possession rather than a collective entity, believing that it stemmed from an individual's social standing and prestige, granting them influence for personal gain (Julien, 2014).

Coleman provided a different definition of social capital. He defined social capital by its function, considering it to be social structures that enable certain actions by individuals (Dika & Singh, 2002). Coleman characterized social capital as something held collectively by a group. Putnam conceptualized social capital as the characteristics of social organization, such as norms, trust, and networks that allow individuals to work together for shared advantages (Glanville & Bienenstock, 2009). He developed the idea of social capital as a property of communities and nations (Portes, 1998). These definitions illustrate that the term 'social capital' encompasses a variety of definitions and understandings, representing a resource obtained through social networks.

Dimensions of Social Capital

The concept of 'social capital' has received criticism due to its lack of a singular definition. Furthermore, social capital is a multifaceted concept that encompasses multiple dimensions. Previous studies have primarily examined social capital through three dimensions: structural, relational, and cognitive. These dimensions are separated to facilitate a clearer understanding of the concept. However, in practice, these dimensions are interrelated and difficult to separate completely. Each dimension contributes to certain aspects of the concept, and none of them can comprehensively explain it alone.

The structural dimension of social capital explains the structure of ties and interactions within an individual's social network (Staber, 2006). It encompasses networks, roles, rules, precedents, and the strength of associational links or activities (Jones, 2005). This dimension focuses on an individual's position within the social structure (Merlo et al., 2006). According to this dimension, an individual's level of social capital depends on the number of formal network memberships they have (Jordaan & Grové, 2013).

The relational dimension of social capital explains the various types of relationships an individual develops within their social network due to continuous interactions with other network members

(Kessels & Poell, 2004). This dimension is activated by network ties and social interactions among actors (Abbey et al., 2016). According to this dimension, an individual's level of social capital depends on the strength of their connections with other members of the social network (Wu & Chiu, 2018). The strength of connections is typically characterized by long-term, recurring, reciprocal, and trustworthy relationships (Pérez-Luño et al., 2011).

The cognitive dimension of social capital explains the shared visions, values, beliefs, attitudes, trust, and norms among members of a social network. According to this dimension, an individual's level of social capital depends on the compatibility of their values with the values of the social network to which they belong (Gómez-Limón et al., 2013). The strength of social capital depends on the level of trust and solidarity among network members (Michelini, 2013).

Forms of Social Capital

In the existing research on social capital, the structural dimension of social capital has been further divided into three categories: bonding, bridging, and linking forms. According to Gilbert et al. (2013), these three forms explain the various types of network relationships that individuals and groups utilize to obtain help and support. Individuals, families, and communities possess different combinations of these relationship forms because certain forms of social capital yield benefits in specific contexts, and no single form can provide all the support in all contexts (Shortt, 2004). Therefore, in order to achieve optimal outcomes, it is necessary to possess and utilize a balanced combination of all three forms of social capital (Brunie, 2009).

The bonding form of social capital refers to strong relationships among individuals who possess close ties to one another, such as family members, close friends, neighbours, and business partners. Bonding social capital is only present among members of a group characterized by strong connections. It is based on the principles of reciprocity and trust (Andriani & Christoforou, 2016) and exhibits a high level of in-group solidarity among its members (Agnitsch et al., 2006).

The bridging form of social capital refers to weaker relationships that extend beyond one's familiar group (Apaliyah et al., 2012) and connect distant individuals with diverse social, economic, and political backgrounds and positions (Kingsley & Townsend, 2006; Nakagawa & Shaw, 2004; Rasmussen et al., 2017). These relationships develop when norms and trust are established within networks (Kanyane & Ilorah, 2015). Bridging social capital is

essential for accessing resources outside of one's own group or local community (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003).

The linking form of social capital refers to hierarchical relationships between people and groups within a social system (Iosifides et al., 2007), in which there are differences in resources, power, and authority (Agger & Jensen, 2015; Leahy & Anderson, 2010). It differs from bridging social capital in that it involves vertical power dynamics (Agger & Jensen, 2015). Linking social capital enables access to new resources and opportunities in other networks (Tenzin & Natsuda, 2016) by bringing together distant individuals and organizations from diverse backgrounds (Dean et al., 2016). It is less strong than bridging social capital but does provide resources from individuals outside of one's close network (King et al., 2019).

Levels of Social Capital

There has been an ongoing debate regarding the individual and collective attributes of social capital. Scholars have differing opinions on whether social capital is primarily a personal, communal, or broad-societal resource. However, there is now a growing consensus that social capital encompasses both an individual and a collective aspect (D'Hombres et al., 2009).

At the micro-level, also known as the individual-level, social capital is developed among individuals. It refers to a person's private social network and the resources available through it (Akçomak, 2011). Individual social capital primarily helps in the attainment of personal goals (Walter et al., 2007). The possession of social capital varies among individuals based on their socioeconomic characteristics, including educational achievement, gender, and age (Halman & Luijkx, 2006).

The meso-level, also referred to as group- or community-level social capital, is formed among members of a community rather than solely between individuals. It is considered a community asset (Gregson et al., 2011), which individuals can utilize to accomplish group objectives (Brune & Bossert, 2009). Collective social capital facilitates community collaboration in solving collective action problems and attaining shared goals (Zhong, 2011).

Macro-level social capital, also known as societal social capital, operates within a broader social context. Many social capital scholars argue that this form of social capital encompasses broader geographical domains, such as nations, states, or larger territories (Bolin et al., 2003; Lindström, 2004). Social capital at the macro level contributes to the development and maintenance of social cohesion, acting as a binding

force within society. It also enables the establishment and sustenance of societal institutions that benefit a large number of people, promoting economic growth, improving governance (Iyer et al., 2005), and enhancing macro-economic performance (Yusuf, 2008).

Building and Mobilization of Social Capital

Social capital, similar to other types of resources, must be created and maintained. Its creation occurs when individuals, groups, organizations, and systems with shared goals come together and establish trusting relationships (Kiptot & Franzel, 2015). These relationships facilitate the development and improvement of social structures, attitudes, norms, values, and behaviours. Additionally, they foster mutual trust among members and a shared understanding of group norms and behaviours (Liang et al., 2015). Building social capital is a long-term process that requires significant effort to maintain positive social relationships (Galunic et al., 2012; Valenzuela et al., 2020). Compared to other forms of capital, building social capital is challenging because it necessitates collective participation (Liang et al., 2015) and a willingness to forego immediate benefits for future gains (Hayami, 2008). The development of sustained social capital necessitates openness, respect, consistency, commitment, understanding, empathy, dependability, and predictability among network members (Wagner & Fernandez-Gimenez, 2008).

Nevertheless, there is a difference between access to social capital and its actual mobilization (Van Der Gaag & Snijders, 2005). Access refers to connections with individuals or groups that have valuable resources and can be approached when necessary (Wall et al., 1998). Conversely, mobilizing social capital entails taking concrete action to utilize these resources from network members to address personal or collective problems (Hansen & Greve, 2015) and achieve desired outcomes (Van Der Gaag & Snijders, 2005). In the real world, factors such as power dynamics, structural impediments, and social norms influence access to social capital (Reimer et al., 2008). Consequently, not all group members have equal access to social capital. Mobilizing social capital is only possible when there is mutual dedication and collaboration among network members, as highlighted by Jamali et al. (2011). It is also important to note that social capital has the potential to be mobilized for both beneficial and detrimental ends (López-Gunn, 2012). While it can facilitate the attainment of individual and collective goals more easily and effectively, it can also restrict personal freedom, impose undue pressure on group members, exclude individuals who are not part

of the group, and enforce strict group rules (Portes & Landolt, 2000).

Effects of Social Capital

Social capital has various benefits across different levels, including individuals, groups, communities, and the broader society. These benefits are achieved through more effective resource exchange (Mungandi et al., 2012), the promotion of cooperative behavior (Choi, 2015; Tlemsan & Matthews, 2021), coordination for problem solving (Tenzin & Natsuda, 2016), and reduced opportunism (Liang et al., 2015).

At the individual level, social capital helps individuals in social networks achieve their goals (Tantardini & Kroll, 2015). Valdaliso et al. (2011) found that it also encourages entrepreneurship, decreases transaction costs and opportunistic behaviours, information dissemination and innovation. By providing access to a broader array of information sources, social capital enhances the quality, relevance, and timeliness of information, thereby enhancing knowledge (Cabello-Medina et al., 2011).

At the household level, social capital enables families with limited resources to work together, reducing costs, improving access to valuable information, and increasing confidence (Tenzin & Natsuda, 2016). According to Yusuf (2008), it also impacts the income and overall well-being of low-income households by improving their performance outcomes.

At the community level, social capital encourages community members to collaborate for collective benefits (Park et al., 2014). According to Brown and Ashman (1996) and Park et al. (2014), communities with high levels of social capital are better equipped to solve problems and achieve common goals by fostering positive attitudes, cooperative behaviours, and cooperation among members.

At the societal level, social capital facilitates connections between individuals and groups within a larger network structure, thereby creating opportunities for accessing new resources (Dean et al., 2016). Societies with high levels of social capital exhibit a greater degree of economic connectedness (Carroll & Stanfield, 2003). Additionally, social capital plays a beneficial role in preventing conflicts (Waisel, 2005), as members act collectively for the common good, thus contributing to the sustainability of efforts and outcomes (Miller & Buys, 2008).

However, interestingly, social capital does not always result in positive outcomes (Kopytko, 2018). Akdere and Roberts (2008) claim that a social capital attribute that can lead to favorable outcomes may also result in unfavorable ones. For example, certain

social networks with excessive social capital can restrict their members from joining wider and more diverse networks (Dakhli & De Clercq, 2004). As a result, members may miss out on new ideas, values, and perspectives that could benefit them (Bhandari, 2014; Wallis et al., 2004). Additionally, members with strong loyalty to a particular group may be hesitant to share resources and information with non-members, hindering productive collaboration for mutual benefit (Rydin & Holman, 2004). It is also possible that stronger members in a group benefit more than weaker members, leading to unequal distributional effects (Johnston et al., 2013; Tenzin & Natsuda, 2016). As a result, the presence of a high level of social capital does not necessarily ensure positive outcomes, and the opposite can also be true. In other words, the relationship between social capital and positive outcomes is not always direct or predictable.

Measurement of Social Capital

There is still no exact measurement of the social capital concept. Scholars of social capital find it difficult to measure due to its intangible nature. Another major debate regarding social capital measurement is how to measure it. This has contributed to the conceptual ambiguity in understanding the social capital concept. So far, no direct measurement of social capital has been achieved. The multidimensionality and intangibility of social capital have resulted in a lack of universally accepted measurement approaches and indicators in the literature. As a result, there has not been a satisfactory measurement of social capital. Therefore, researchers have been using proxy variables to conceptualize and measure social capital that is appropriate for their specific context. This has made evaluating the conflicting findings more challenging. Previous studies on social capital have not been able to determine a single metric that covers all of its dimensions. Comparisons are difficult since indicators vary in number and emphasis in one or a few dimensions, forms, or levels. Some authors have developed up to 124 indicators, grouped into 44 variables (Wolz et al., 2006). These indicators differ geographically and across sectors.

Commonly used indicators for measuring social capital include membership in voluntary associations and trust (Ferlander, 2007), networks, norms, and participation (Liang et al., 2015). Other indicators include groups, social norms and values (Knorringer & Van Staveren, 2007), solidarity (Wambugu et al., 2010), satisfaction and loyalty (Golovina et al., 2014), altruism (Doh & Ács, 2015), community involvement (Dean et al., 2016), social network density, network homogeneity, network proximity, relational continuity, reciprocity, and relational investment (Cheung &

Chan, 2010), social agency (Njuki et al., 2008), non-electoral political participation, civic activities, and volunteering (Hurtado et al., 2011).

In addition, social capital has also been measured by indicators such as communication of technology and market information, awareness of common goals (Zhou et al., 2018), common standards of activity, shared expectations of behavior, and beliefs about the tie's nature and purpose (Hughes & Perrons, 2011), voting behaviors, interaction with neighbors, feelings about helping others, voter turnout, church membership, and newspaper readership (Kouvonen et al., 2006), and social isolation (D'Hombres et al., 2009).

The measurement of social capital is often done in an *ad hoc* and pragmatic manner. The choice of measurement depends on whether researchers' emphasis is on the content, sources, or consequences of social capital (Doh & Ács, 2015). Additionally, since social capital varies throughout time and societies, the historical period and cultural context must be taken into account while measuring it (Aldrich, 2011). The empirical realities of developing countries do not correspond with standard Western metrics of social capital.

Theory of Social Capital

Social capital theory considers social structures and networks of relationships between individuals as valuable due to their ability to provide access to embedded resources (Chiu et al., 2006; Florin et al., 2003). These resources are particularly crucial for individuals or groups with limited resources (Prashantham, 2010; Yang & Li, 2016). The value of these relationships stems from the network ties and the assets that can be mobilized through them (Lefebvre et al., 2016). Resources are contributed, shared, and become accessible through the establishment of social relations. Dense social networks are seen as important environments for cooperative behaviors and the coordination of collective actions. The primary goal of social capital theory is to shed light on how to access valuable resources. The theory suggests that actors gain access to different types of resources through their participation in various relationships. Relationship networks are a critical component of social capital theory.

In social capital theory, there are two main schools of thought. The ego-centric or psycho-centric theories view the main actor as an individual who utilizes resources from social ties or networks to take individual action (McElroy et al., 2006). On the other hand, socio-centric theories consider the main actor to be a collective entity, like a community or organization, and hold that social capital is

located within the internal connections that define their structures and provide cohesion (McElroy et al., 2006). While there are ongoing disagreements between these two schools, there is a consensus that networking relationships offer value to actors by granting them access to embedded resources for their benefit (Acquaah, 2007). Thus, the essence of social capital theory lies in recognizing the importance of relationships and strengthening connections within social networks, which leads to favorable outcomes that impact performance.

Debates

The literature pertaining to social capital has sparked discourse on the subject of cooperation. Social capital is acknowledged as a valuable development asset, but its utility is a topic of debate due to unequal access for all individuals. On occasion, social capital may not afford equal benefits to all members and can even lead to adverse outcomes. This raises the question of how individuals can prevent free-riding and ensure an equal distribution of benefits. Concerns arise regarding cooperation when there is inequality in benefits and uncertainty in rewards. An examination of the literature on social capital reveals that various conceptualizations of this phenomenon yield different applications. Different interrelated dimensions, forms, and levels of social capital have been identified, posing challenges in accurately classifying it within a real-world context. Furthermore, the intangible nature of social capital and the absence of consensus on a singular definition further complicate its measurement and analysis.

Conclusion

The concept of social capital plays a crucial role in explaining cooperation, and it serves as a vital link between individuals, groups, and societies. It significantly influences human cooperation, making it essential to comprehend the appropriate form, dimension, and level of social capital within a community. However, there is an ongoing debate surrounding the effectiveness of social capital in development. Neglecting social relations, trust, and behavioral norms in policy research and analysis can result in erroneous policy formulation. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to gain an understanding of social capital and cooperation, particularly in developing countries, to devise appropriate policies and strategies for development.

The level of cooperation among individuals and groups varies across different societies. It is crucial to comprehend the underlying reasons for these disparities in order to guide the formulation of suitable policies for development interventions.

A comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence cooperation is thus imperative. Consequently, further studies are required to determine which forms and dimensions of social capital are most effective in different contexts and to provide well-informed policy recommendations. Such studies will also aid in the development of policies and strategies aimed at minimizing the negative impacts of social capital.

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