

Relationship between Education and Social Capital

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Abstract

Social capital is a sociological concept, which refers to connections within and between social networks. Social capital has been considered in this paper as one of developing links between country development and education. Researcher believes that the open distance education can affects quality and quantity of social capital in country. A focus on social capital allows for a closer examination of capacity of individuals and groups for making linkages among themselves and with organizations at the local or national level. Our point is that rule of distance education in social capital promotion have been neglected by researchers and decision makers. In this paper, we develop our argument first by describing social capital and learning community. Then describe how distance education communities can improve social capital and socioeconomic development. Payame Noor University with more than 450 branches through the country has potential capacity for improving social capital via social community webs.

Key words: education, social capital, distance education, social community webs, development

Introduction

Social capital is a sociological concept, which refers to connections within and between social networks. Though there are a variety of related definitions, which have been described as "something of a cure-all"[1] for the problems of modern society, they tend to share the core idea "that social networks have value. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individual and collective), so do social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups".[2] Family, friends, and acquaintances frequently constitute an important asset essential to the well-being of Iranians. When one is seeking support to make it through hard times, searching for a new job opportunity, or simply living a full and active life, it pays to know people. A wide range of research illustrates the ways in which the availability and use of various social ties may make a difference to individual well-being. Whether it is a question of early childhood development, educational attainment, avoidance of delinquency, labour market entry, or aging well in your retirement, knowing people to turn to for resources and support may make a difference for both getting by and getting ahead. Moreover, what is true for individuals is also true for groups and associations: those with the right mix of social connections may be able to negotiate more effectively the various challenges they face, from economic growth and community development to crime prevention and engaging an active citizenry.

People and groups with extensive social connections linking them to people with diverse resources tend to be more hired, housed, healthy, and happy. To make this concept practicable for public policy purposes, research and analysis on social capital must be able to answer clearly some basic questions. How do people have access to, and realize benefits from social capital? How can it complement or enhance the value of other resources, such as human and financial capital? Should governments play a role in the creation of social capital? How can we design more effective policies and programs by taking this concept into consideration? This paper tries to answer to some of these questions. It also proposes some possible approaches for the use and integration of social capital in the Iranian policy (and research) agenda. After 17 years of teaching and research in Payame Noor University, I have concluded that there is a benefit to be gained for public policy by incorporating a social capital component into relevant government programs and initiatives. This does not mean, however, that governments should pursue a grand strategy to develop Iranian social capital simply to have more social capital. Governments should instead consider social capital as a means or instrument that, in complement with other resources, can facilitate the achievement of specific policy and program objectives, and target any social capital-related interventions accordingly. More specifically, five key insights emerged from the policy makers.

1. The networks of social ties that a person or group can call upon for resources and support constitute their social capital. This social capital may be an important, underestimated ingredient in the well-being and participation of individuals and groups in the social, political, and economic life of their community.

Ensuring that individuals have the opportunity to participate fully in society is a central preoccupation of social policy. Government policies in industrialized countries have emphasized the acquisition of human capital and integration into the labour market as a means for creating just such an opportunity. More recently, public policy planners have also turned to thinking about financial and physical assets in the form of savings and housing as other important resources to promote social inclusion and participation. Developing these resources helps to build people's capabilities in advance of a period of difficulty or crisis, rather than only offering remedial action afterward. This reflects a social investment approach to social policy, whereby, through recognizing the value of human capital and other assets, including social capital, the state can help equip its citizens with the capabilities to participate fully in the social and economic life of the country.

2. A focus on social capital allows for a closer examination of the capacity of individuals and groups to forge linkages among themselves and with organizations at the local level. Understanding these relational dynamics is particularly important in a context where governments increasingly search for ways to support local communities and citizen participation through partnerships and the mobilization of local resources. It allows for an understanding of how links between various actors in the community can lead to a more coordinated approach to action and involvement, better access to untapped resources, and the creation of new community resources.

3. A social capital perspective will be particularly fruitful in three areas of policy: helping populations at risk of social exclusion, supporting key life-course transitions, and promoting community development efforts. These are all areas where the mobilization of resources through social relationships can have a significant impact. The integration of immigrants, the care for frail seniors and neighborhood crime prevention are all examples of public policy objectives that would benefit from an explicit consideration of people's social networks.

4. Governments inevitably affect patterns of social capital development. Taking into consideration the role of social capital (and the interactions between social relationships and policies) in a more systematic way in program design, implementation and evaluation can potentially make a significant difference in the achievement of policy objectives. Adopting a social capital perspective emphasizes the importance of paying attention to the value, usefulness, and dynamics of social ties. Do they bring access to useful resources? Are they unduly stressed or in need of supplementary resources (as in the case of some care networks)? In instances where social capital may be a useful instrument in the achievement of particular policy objectives, there is a potential array of options by which it can be integrated into program design. In a few cases, this may be fairly direct in terms of enabling the creation and support of specific network relationships or tapping into existing networks to deliver services more effectively. More commonly, programs may find it useful to establish favorable conditions for the generation of relevant social capital, or at least to ensure that they do not arbitrarily disrupt sources of useful social capital already existing among populations or communities targeted by interventions.

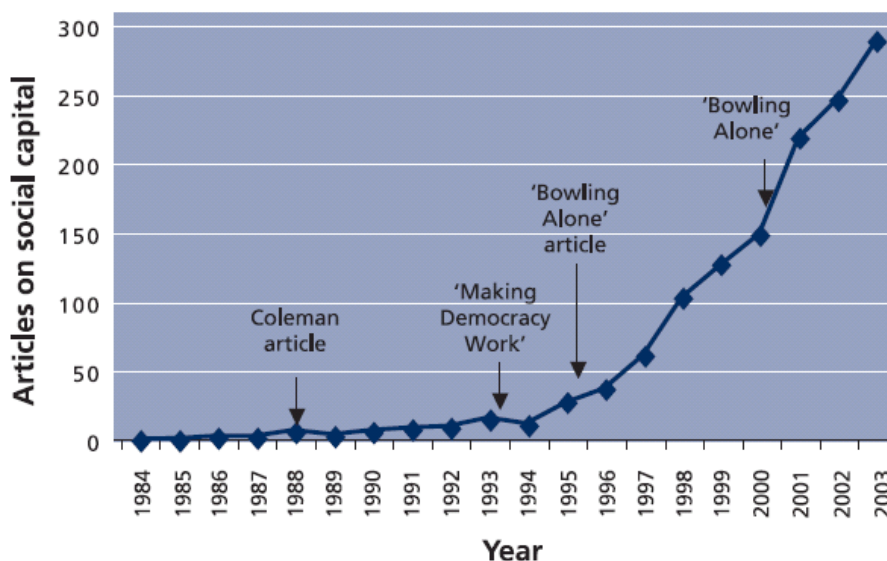
5. We need more concrete and context-specific empirical evidence on the best practices for integrating social capital into government policies and programs. Furthering the empirical evidence on the interactions between social capital and government policies and programs can be achieved by integrating explicit measures of social capital into relevant departmental research and data development plans, evaluation frameworks, and demonstration projects (in policy areas most likely to benefit from a social capital perspective). Using a network-based approach to social capital allows policy researchers to take advantage of a number of practical and proven measurement tools that can be applied to a variety of research instruments— from thematic longitudinal surveys to exploratory case studies – for capturing and tracking the presence and manifestations of social capital in diverse life circumstances and local contexts. The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. The first briefly reviews concept of social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AS A PUBLIC POLICY TOOL

What is the value of social capital for public policy? In 2008, the Payame Noor University had extended their branches through country to 458. This extension was inspired by a growing interest within academic and policy circles sparked by research linking social capital to a broad range of issues central to public agendas. Indeed, many observers were pointing to a myriad of ways in which existing government efforts were implicitly connected to social and human capital in Iran. Scholarly work on social capital in various disciplines increased dramatically over the past decade. Robert Putnam was already the most cited social scientist of the 1990's and with 2000's *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community*, he truly launched the idea of social capital into a wider public consciousness. Along with this widespread interest, however, came some considerable grounds for skepticism that the concept could be usefully operationalized for public policy purposes.

Efforts to harness the concept for policy and program development had been severely limited by conceptual ambiguities and measurement difficulties. Some researchers worried that the concept had increasingly taken on a “circus tent” quality in which social capital had come to stand for everything positive and civic (Briggs, 2004: 151)[3]. Because of the seeming versatility of the concept – sometimes referring to social networks, but other times also including such things as trust, church attendance, community cohesion, or institutional efficacy – critics feared that social capital ran the risk of being rendered meaningless by becoming everything to everyone.

Figure 1: Academic Articles on Social Capital, 1984-2003



If social capital were to be a useful tool in the way that the concept of human capital has become, it clearly needed to be operationalized in a manner that could allow public authorities to concretely identify what it was, open it up to effective measurement, and thereby explore its productive potential in achieving broader public policy goals.

Objectives

Extension of Payame Noor University should be considered as social capital project. Therefore to assess the potential role and contribution of social capital in the achievement of government policy objectives, with the hope that a clearer awareness and understanding of the phenomenon could help to better tune public policies and programs and broaden future policy options. Two objectives were set.

- Develop an operational definition and rigorous framework for the analysis and measurement of social capital and role of Payame Noor University on it.
- Identify key policy and program areas where social capital may play an important role in attaining policy objectives.

Methodology

To accomplish these objectives, the work of the research was divided into three interrelated streams: conceptualization, measurement, and implications for public policy.

Results obtained in each stream should be developed through a series of research and consultation activities should undertaken by the Payame Noor University as Social Capital Project, in close collaboration with departmental partners and academic researchers. These activities should be included:

- Comprehensive reviews of existing social capital literature and international work in the area;
- Consultations, workshops, and conferences to gather structured input, feedback, and advice on proposed options and approaches;
- Small group discussions on existing practices in the area; and
- commissioned technical and issue papers from academic experts.

The first part of the project focused on the development of an operational definition and conceptual framework for the analysis and measurement of social capital. This was based on input received from federal policy and research managers from more than 15 departments and agencies, and from a group of leading Iranian and international experts in the area.

The second part of the project should explore key policy and program areas, particularly in social policy, where the application of social capital may play an important role. This began with an international conference with the OECD and several federal partners, in November 2003, on the role of social capital in immigrant integration and the management of diversity.

The studies link social capital to a wide range of issue areas including:

- Poverty reduction;
- Community development;
- Youth civic engagement;
- Community crime prevention;
- Healthy aging;
- The settlement of new immigrants to Canada;
- Educational attainment in Aboriginal communities; and
- Aboriginal community policing.

This paper aimed at incorporating what we have learned into a set of conclusions and recommendations for the strategic use of social capital within the Payame Noor University, Iran.

THE CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

What Do We Mean by Social Capital? A clear understanding of what is meant by social capital is the sine qua non for rendering the concept useful to public policy practitioners. While there are many legitimate differences in opinion as to how best to conceptualize social capital, the researcher has retained and proposed a definition of social capital based on social networks as its central component. Social capital refers to the networks of social relations that may provide individuals and groups with access to resources and supports. Adopting a network-based approach to social capital makes sense for at least three reasons. It allows us to: operationalize social capital in a strategic way for public policy; distinguish social capital from other closely related concepts; and promote consistency in research and measurement. Operationalizing Social Capital in a Strategic Way for Public Policy Using a network-based approach enables us to look at social capital as a resource or instrument to achieve potential individual or group benefits. It makes it possible to investigate the influence of social capital over a range of questions of public interest and to understand the effects that government policies and programs can have on the creation or mobilization of social capital by individuals and communities. Researchers can investigate the ways in which individuals or groups invest in and draw on their social networks. Even with this relatively lean approach to social capital, various dimensions can be drawn into the analysis. Depending on the particular research and policy application, social capital studies can encompass:

- how individuals and groups develop or access social networks (constraints and enabling conditions);
- the various characteristics of the networks (e.g., diversity of members) and network dynamics (how they are actually used or mobilized to access and create resources);
 - the norms and institutional arrangements that form the context in which such networks operate;
 - the resources that can be potentially accessed or created through participation in the networks; and
 - the benefits of social relationships in the form of economic, social, and health outcomes. This model distinguishes social capital from its determinants and its outcomes. An inability to make just such a distinction has, at times, been the source of much confusion in the literature and in policy discussions about social capital. A network-based approach, however, draws a line between what social capital is and what it does.

The model also captures the dynamic and context specific nature of social capital. People may need to draw different resources from different types of networks at different times, depending on their life circumstances. Moreover, a network that is instrumental during a certain life transition or event (e.g., when a family member becomes sick, when a youth changes cities to attend post-secondary education, or when an individual takes on a short-term career assignment) can be quite episodic and context specific, and may not continue to be active after a certain period. The potential impact of social capital on various outcomes will vary depending on individual characteristics and experiences and on the ways in which its effects are enhanced or diminished by the wider social, political, economic, and cultural environment. Static and non-context specific measures of social capital may therefore be of more limited utility for policy purposes.

Potential Benefits from Social Capital Social

Networks (formal and informal) can bring many advantages. Indeed, the value of social capital depends on the value of the flow of benefits that can be drawn from an activation of these networks. The same is true of human capital; the value of any given education or training depends on the flow of benefits it produces. There is a range of potential benefits or resources that may flow from a person or group's network of social ties. These include the following.

- **Material goods and services:** Social networks often constitute an essential source of informal services such as child care, informal health care, language training or, in distressed situations, food, clothing, and housing.
- **Information:** Job hunters can draw on their contacts to get a scoop on new employment opportunities. Collaboration between community groups can help provide coordinated information for newly arrived immigrants.
- **Reduced transaction costs:** Organizations or groups may spend less time finding the right employee or new business contacts if social ties can act as intermediaries.
- **Emotional support:** In stressful situations, support networks may help to find a solution to the problem, reduce the perceived importance of the problem, or provide a distraction from the problem. Indeed, simply knowing you have a potential support network may increase your sense of self efficacy and control.
- **Reinforcement of positive behaviors:** Friends or family may influence whether individuals exercise, eat healthy diets, or quit smoking.
- **Service Brokerage:** Network contacts may help broker effective access to health, employment, or training services for those who would be unable or unwilling to access these services by themselves. Individuals may also benefit from a community's social capital, even if they have low levels of personal social capital. For example, evidence from a study of the 1995 Chicago heat wave found that the social connections and linkages that existed in a neighborhood made a difference. More than 700 people died as a result of that heat wave, with the highest risk of death being concentrated among isolated elderly persons. However, those neighborhoods with networks of neighbors who regularly saw each other and interacted on a daily basis were better able to protect their residents against the risk of death, even those elderly persons who were typically isolated from their neighbors. Thus benefits from social capital need not be private, but can also take on public dimensions (Cannuscio et al., 2003)[4]. Payame Noor University with more than one million students and 458 branches[5] has a grate capacity for increasing social capital, so this potential benefit should be estimated.

Evaluating social capital

Though Bourdieu might agree with Coleman that social capital in the abstract is a neutral resource, his work tends to show how it can be used practically to produce or reproduce inequality, demonstrating for instance how people gain access to powerful positions through the direct and indirect employment of social connections. Robert Putnam has used the concept in a much more positive light: though he was at first careful to argue that social capital was a neutral term, stating "whether or not [the] shared are praiseworthy is, of course, entirely another matter", [6] his work on American society tends to frame social capital as a producer of "civic engagement" and also a broad societal measure of communal health. [7] He also transforms social capital from a resource possessed by individuals to an attribute of collectives, focusing on norms and trust as producers of social capital to the exclusion of networks.

Mahyar Arefi [8] identifies consensus building as a direct positive indicator of social capital. Consensus implies "shared interest" and agreement among various actors and stakeholders to induce collective action. Collective action is thus an indicator of increased social capital. Edwards and Foley, as editors of a special edition of the American Behavioural Scientist on "Social Capital, Civil Society and Contemporary Democracy", raised two key issues in the study of social capital. First, social capital is not equally available to all, in much the same way that other forms of capital are differently available. Geographic and social isolation limit access to this resource. Second, not all social capital is created equally. The value of a specific source of social capital depends in no small part on the socio-economic position of the source with society. On top of this, Portes has identified four negative consequences of social capital: exclusion of outsiders; excess claims on group members; restrictions on individual freedom; and downward levelling norms. [1] Here it is important to note the distinction between "bonding" and "bridging". There is currently no research which identifies the negative consequences of "bridging" social capital when in balance with its necessary antecedent, "bonding".

Finally, social capital is often linked to the success of democracy and political involvement. Robert D. Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone* makes the argument that social capital is linked to the recent decline in American political participation.[9]

Conclusion

A focus on social capital allows authorities to consider the importance of non-material assets in social policy. Researcher believes that the open distance learning (DISTANCE EDUCATION) can affects quality and quantity of social capital in country. A focus on social capital allows for a closer examination of capacity of individuals and groups for making linkages among themselves and with organizations at the local or national level. Our point is that rule of DISTANCE EDUCATION in social capital promotion have been neglected by researchers and decision makers. In fact presented paper open new horizons for role of open distance learning in social capital that should be develop and follow by other researchers.

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