Community Vitality and Social Capital

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Introduction

Putnam argues that social capital refers to core values, norms, social trust and networks that facilitate coordination and cooperation that is mutually beneficial among members – it is a moral resource (cited in Uslaner, 1999). Bourdieu (1997) sees social capital as potential resources that are linked to a strong network of institutionalized relationships. Individuals have access to social capital through their membership to a network or groups. These connections are built up over years and can be transferred from generation to generation (Edwards, Franklin & Holland, 2003, p.7). Edwards, Franklin and Holland establish that, "the amount of social capital resources available to people depends on the size of their networks, on the extent and quality of the range of capitals possessed by those connections, on expectations of reciprocity being met, and on their status within the group" (2003, p. 8). For Bourdieu (1997), social capital has to be continuously worked at, rather than merely being constituted in, for example, the genealogical definition of kinship relations. It 'is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly useable in the short or long term'" (Edwards et al., 2003, p.7).

Many different dimensions impact the creation and maintenance of social capital in a community including democracy and trust, economy and education, connectivity, time and the well-being of individuals or a community. Social capital in and of itself is not a necessary and sufficient condition for community vitality, it is interdependent with robust governance (Dale & Newman, 2008). This discussion paper explores the interrelationship between social capital and community vitality.

Democracy and Trust

Although democracy does not necessarily guarantee high levels of trust and social capital within a society, democracies can promote trust and strong, vibrant communities when people believe they can work together to create fundamental change (Uslaner, 1999). A society with strong social capital benefits from people feeling part of their community and giving their time to their community. In crisis,

citizens work together to assist one another, individuals trust others and help strangers, and neighbours take care of each other. Social capital is important to both human and community vitality as it helps strengthen communities (by allowing people to collectively resolve problems and to mobilize networks for social change and innovation), deepens our awareness to our interconnectedness, creates strong networks and social bonds and creates trusting communities (North Dakota State University, 2009).

Uslaner (1999), among others, discusses how trust is fundamental to creating community vitality; equally trust is a critical dimension of social capital. He argues that social capital reflects a system of values and social trust is deeply embedded within this system. Communities that share strong positive values bring people together, creating strong norms of cooperation and reciprocity and collective identity. This identity formation becomes even more crucial in highly plural societies. This sense of cooperation develops trust and leads people to become more active members of their community, be helpful and respectful and to follow moral codes and norms. Uslaner further states, "we need to go beyond our kin and in-groups to trust a wide range of people, especially those whom we don't know and who are different from us—charitable contributions exemplify this dilemma. Voluntary giving helps make a community prosperous by reducing poverty and helping the underprivileged to make a fresh start" (Uslaner, 1999, p. 124). Another key measure of the quality of social capital in a community relates to a community's capacity for resilience and agency to respond to challenges.

Dale, and Newman (2006) discuss the importance of the ability to turn social capital into action can be viewed as a group's agency. Agency is the ability of a group to respond to challenges, and this is a critical part of a community's capacity for resilience, to be able to draw upon their agency and social capital to respond to issues in their community. Agency is also linked to the personal power people feel they have in their life, and as discussed in earlier papers, one's sense of autonomy. Leighton identifies three elements to human power: the power to shape one's own life, the power to be resilient in difficult times, and the power to shape the social world (Leighton, 2009). When people feel a true sense of human power and hope for the future, participation in civic society increases, building trust, social bonds, social capital and healthier communities.

Economy and Education

Civic participation has fallen over the last 20 years along with interpersonal trust (Uslaner, 1999, Putnam, 2000). Uslaner argues that there is a connection between North Americans' withdrawal from civic society and a loss of social capital. Putnam (2007) discusses how the increase in television viewing can account for human withdrawal from social activity and civic engagement. A large portion of society habitually watches television instead of actively participating in the greater community and critically thinking about key societal issues (Uslaner, 1999). However, Uslaner believes that a decrease in overall optimistic thinking about the future is the true cause for the decline in societal trust. He states that optimism

contributes to trust, promotes civic engagement and creates virtuous communities. Thus, hope for the future and having a positive outlook are the building blocks for interpersonal trust and cooperative values, "Optimists believe that other people will be helpful, are tolerant of people from different backgrounds, and value both diversity and independent thinking; they have confidence in their own capacity to shape the world. Optimists are not worried that others will exploit them. If they take a chance and lose, their upbeat worldview leads them to try again. Setbacks are temporary; the next encounter will be more cooperative. So it makes sense to trust others" (Uslaner, 1999, p. 138). Another key aspect to building and sustaining social capital and community vitality is access to equitable distribution of resources.

Exploitation or inequitable distribution and access to resources and growing disparity does not strengthen community vitality, civic participation, nor encourage social bonding, a sense of optimism or trust. Bourdieu is concerned with how people create the world in which they live, focusing on how class and systemic inequalities are created and maintained throughout generations. He discusses how the construction of social capital within a society is impacted and stratified by social and economic inequalities (cited in Edwards et al., 2003). Paradoxically, In parallel with an increase in GDP (Statistics Canada, 2011), inequality has also climbed (World Bank, 2011) between 1997 – 2008. Research demonstrate that there is a strong correlation between levels of education and economic status to levels of social capital (Edward et al. 2003: Stone, 2000: Wuthnow, 1997). Civic participation including voting, membership in voluntary associations, giving to charity, and volunteering has also decreased over the last 25 years in relation to education (Uslaner, 1999). Employment is deeply connected to social capital; there is a link between employment and civic participation and volunteering, creating a correlation between employment and institutional trust. Home ownership and residential stability has also been shown to relate to overall civic participation (Stone, 2000). And all of these factors are also key determinants of the vitality of a community.

Wuthnow (1997) has argued that the evidence relating to the decline in overall civic engagement in the U.S. has occurred disproportionately between the rich and poor. Stone states in his analysis that "social capital is distributed unevenly, that it has become more unequally distributed over time, and that its role may be one of exclusion rather than inclusion. In sum, despite numerous methodological concerns about the way social capital is operationalized in some of the studies reported here, these research findings generally provide support for the relationship between social capital and economic well-being at a macro level described above. There is much to suggest that social capital operates well and is easily facilitated and maintained in areas and circumstances of relative prosperity, but that social capital is hindered by economic disadvantage, poverty and inequality"(Stone, 2000, p. 8).

Understanding the different dimensions of social capital is also critical in order to inform social policies. Edwards et al. (2003, p.20) emphasize how the different discourses around social capital are critical as they help to inform how policies should be shaped: "the contribution of social capital to reducing inequality and

building the capacity of the poor communities will also depend on the relation of community networks to the loci of political power, which can be seen as 'linking social capital". Other research has also shown that government policies unless developed strategically at the linking level, that is, bridging and vertical social capital, can actually destroy or inhibit existing social capital in a community (Dale, in press).

Issues related to a deficit in social capital tend to dominate the policy agenda in the short term; however, we need to understand the spectrum of key variables that impact social capital before creating policies designed to solve social problems (Edwards et al., 2003). In the end, in order for social capital to thrive and be of benefit to all members of society, deep societal problems related to inequality, education, poverty, unemployment, underemployment and unequal distribution of resources need to be addressed.

Connectivity

Social capital is dependent upon connectivity, people need the space and time in order to connect to one another, to meet accidentally, to be engaged in conversation. Increased noise pollution, declining natural environments and scenic views, and a decrease in overall time for recreation and volunteering can negatively impact social capital. Bashir (2002) discusses how the physical and social environment created by sprawl encourages a sense of isolation, restricts diversity and restricts people from feeling a part of a greater community. Clearly, the way we build our communities and its transportation choices determines critical space for building and maintaining social capital. A sense of connectivity is also related to a person's of security and safety in their community; Putnam asks do we need more policemen in communities, or do we need more people knowing their neighbours?

The report on Public Health and Urban Sprawl in Ontario discusses four aspects that are fundamental to a sense of community including membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (Bray et al., 2005). Many different factors in modern society have led to an erosion of social capital including higher rates of television viewing, more time on computers, more time in cars, fear related to crime, and minimal contact with neighbours (Bray et al., 2005, p.34).

The Sierra Club (2002) has illustrated that sprawl commuters spend three to four times as many hours driving as individuals living in dense, well-planned communities. Most individuals living in the suburbs require access to a car in order to make trips for basic amenities and services (Frumkin, 2002). In suburban communities, and many urban centres, mass public transit tends to be inaccessible, creating barriers for low-income people, the elderly and the disabled to live without access to a car. Overall, the loss of community created by sprawl is affecting people's connection with nature and to each other, thus impacting social capital throughout North America (Bray et al., 2005). A decrease in civic participation is

partly a result of individuals having less time due to being caught in a time crunch and spending more time in a vehicle (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2010, p.18).

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing Report (2010) also highlights that Canadians are spending less time on social leisure activities; a higher percentage of women (approximately 20 percent more than men) feel caught in a time crunch, and marginalized groups experience greater time-use challenges. Studies demonstrate that long commutes, traffic delays and long work hours leave people exhausted and facing increased time demands. People are spending more and more time in cars; Goldberg (1999) discusses that between 1969 and 1990, the U.S. population grew only 21 percent, however the number of car trips grew by 42 percent. A report by the Sierra Club (2002) illustrates that the average American spends 443 hours per year driving a car. Consequently, people are experiencing more time in their cars and less time is being devoted to social and cultural activities and in building greater connectivity and social bonds.

The Modern-day Time Crunch

As mentioned above, modern-day society leaves less time for individuals to engage in civic life as well as leisure activities. Laptops, Blackberries, iPhones and email have increased the demand for workers to be continually 'on call', blurring the boundaries between workplace and home. In recent decades, there has been a significant increase in the amount of time children and adolescents spend watching television and interacting with computers and videogames, and it is estimated to exceed daily recommended levels (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2010). Society has seen a rise in the percentage of working adults engaged in contract jobs with limited or no employee benefits or job security, increasing time demands and overall stress levels (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2010, p.7).

Patterns of time use are also affected by social and economic opportunity. The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (2010, p. 14) emphasizes that, "Canadians marginalized by race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, disability, gender, sexual orientation and language proficiency, experience systemic barriers to social and economic opportunity. These barriers directly influence their time use patterns and indirectly affect their exposure to health risks and participation in health-enhancing activities." Social capital is consequently impacted due to people having limited time for civic participation, or time to build networks and social bonds through social engagements and physical, cultural and social activities.

This 'time crunch' is also having an impact on volunteering, as there has been a decrease in volunteering for culture and recreation organizations (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2010). In Canada, the performing arts have also been impacted by a decrease in support. The total annual number of performances by theatre companies, opera and musical theatre companies has decreased from 45,000 to less than 38,000 between 2001 and 2006 (Ibid, 2010). A lack of support for the arts not only impacts the vitality of a community by potentially creating financial barriers

for artists to continue to devote time to their craft, but also reduces social capital due to individuals spending less time participating in social and cultural activities and cultivating strong social connections. Access to resources and activities such as community, cultural, sports and recreational activities and the outdoors all dramatically impact the quality of life of individuals and the social capital of individuals and communities (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2010).

Well-being and Social Capital

Life satisfaction and personal development have been shown to be two fundamental elements of an individual's overall well-being. A correlation between social capital and well-being can be made, as many of the factors that impact social capital also impact personal well-being, including economic status, education, sense of community and purpose, levels of autonomy, agency and family structure. A set of indicators measuring the well-being of children has been developed by the U.S. government. These include population and family characteristics, economic security indicators, health indicators, behaviour and social environment indicators, and education indicators (Rees, Francis & Robbins, 2005).

The New Economics Foundation conducted a pilot study in Nottingham, U.K., focusing on life satisfaction and personal development. Key findings from this pilot study illustrated that well-being fell as children got older and that approximately one-third of the young people surveyed were unhappy in daily life and potentially suffered from mental health problems (New Economics Foundation, 2004). Well-being proved to decrease as children got older; life satisfaction scores fell by 5 to10 percent when comparing 9–11-year-olds with 12–15-year-olds (New Economics Foundation, 2004). Rees et al. discuss in their report, *Spiritual Health and the Well-Being of Urban Young People* (2005), that overall well-being and social capital is lower in unemployed households and separated homes. For example, young people from separated parents have lower personal well-being scores, are less happy about the area in which they live, and are more concerned about crime. Young people whose parents are unemployed are more likely to talk to a close friend rather than a parent about issues that are bothering them. Meltzer et al. (2000) found higher rates of mental disorders among young people who live with parents who are both unemployed (Rees et al., 2005). These findings suggest that well-being, social bonds and social capital are impacted by family structure, sense of community and family economic status. Clearly, there is a relationship between level of income, employment opportunities, to levels of autonomy and connectivity through social capital to one's community, but much more research remains to be done.

Conclusion

The creation and maintenance of social capital in a community is impacted by many different elements. Vital communities are created when people know their neighbours, have the time to devote to making different connections, often through volunteering and social activities, the arts and trust in others. Equitable distribution of resources and education positively impacts community vitality and social capital.

The modern-day time crunch also impacts the amount of time people have to connect with each other and create social bonds, thereby impacting social capital. Personal development and well-being are impacted by economic status, education, sense of community and purpose, and family structure, all of which also influences social capital. In order for a community to be vital and thrive, encouraging the development of social capital needs to be a priority and creating the spaces for diverse types of connection. Strong, resilient and healthy communities are shaped by fostering connections with people and nature, supporting the arts and culture and social bonds, prioritizing education for all, creating walkable communities, cultivating trust, encouraging diversity and creating the opportunities for increasing equitable distribution of resources.

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