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Social Capital

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Abstract

Social capital is a social facility which is a basis of agency for those who invest in it and have access to it. There is no unitary theory of social capital but a number of distinctive accounts which emphasize different bases and particular outcomes of social capital. The best known contributions to the identification and theorization of social capital are James Coleman (1990), Robert Putnam (2000) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986). The approaches of these theorists are discussed.

Capital, in general, is a self-augmenting resource; social capital, then, is a social facility which is a basis of agency for those who invest in it and have access to it. There is no unitary theory of social capital but a number of distinctive accounts which emphasize different bases and particular outcomes of social capital. The best known contributions to the identification and theorization of social capital are James Coleman (1990), Robert Putnam (2000) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986).

Coleman's approach to social capital is through a version of rational choice theory, which is therefore individualistic and calculative. Rational choice theory holds that individuals act on self-interest to fulfil their purposes through application of means selected for their efficiency. This starting point raises interesting questions for the consideration of social capital because the pursuit of self-selected and self-satisfying goals, self-interest, is normally seen as the opposite of social cooperation which is at the heart of social capital. For Coleman (1990: 302), social capital consists of 'some aspects of a social structure' which facilitates 'certain actions of individuals who are within the structure'. Social norms that govern behaviour and which individuals internalize, social networks that provide support and resources to

their members, and the social relationships in which every member of society participates are all elements in the formation of social capital (Coleman 1990: 334). All of these emerge as unintended consequences of individual acts of self-interest. For Coleman, then, social capital is a public good, available for all social actors irrespective of other endowments, only beneficial and always benign.

In many ways Coleman's understanding of social capital is extended by Putnam (2000). One difference, though, is that whereas Coleman tends to focus on the strong ties of kinship and neighbourhood, to draw on the language of network analysis (Granovetter 1973), Putnam is more concerned with the weak ties of local organizations and voluntary associations in his characterization of social capital. Indeed, Putnam's concern in *Bowling Alone* (2000) is that the increasing social isolation of ordinary Americans and the decline of their associational activity are responsible for the depletion of social capital in America. Putnam claims that individual's time depletion, caused by two-career families and travel in metropolitan areas, as well as the home-centeredness generated by TV and the internet together are responsible for the reduction of social participation. As participation and reciprocity decline so too does social trust; the possibilities of cooperation decrease as the means to achieve it are depleted. For Putnam (2000: 19) social capital is the 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.' An important technical contribution is Putnam's distinction between inclusive social capital that has a 'bridging' function and the exclusivity of 'bonding' social capital (Putnam 2000: 22-23).

The concept of social capital advanced by Bourdieu (1986) anticipates the idea that social capital functions in terms of exclusive relations of privilege and is therefore primarily of the 'bonding' type. Bourdieu (1986: 249–50) says that social capital is:

the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.

As a network-dependent facility social capital, according to Bourdieu, is possessed only by members of the network and comprises the collective resources of the network in question.

Because the benefits of social capital, as a function of access to network resources through network membership, are effectively group privileges, only available through network membership, Lin (2001: 24) similarly characterizes social capital as class (privilege) goods because of the way it reproduces the socially dominant class. This aspect of social capital is characterized by Portes (1998: 15) in terms of the 'exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and downward leveling norms'. In a similar vein Barbalet (2000: 94) notes the 'failure of social capital theorists' such as Coleman and Putnam to treat the use of social capital 'particularistically' in strategies of 'social closure'.

It is clear, then, that social capital can be defined in alternate ways. It may be seen as a societal resource available to all which enriches society in general and all its members. Alternatively it may be seen as a particular resource of social networks, available only to their members and mobilized for their benefit, possibly against others in the society. It can be seen that Coleman treats social capital as a variety of entities commonly assessable to all within the social structure. In a similar vein Putnam (1993: 167) emphasizes general social structure: '[s]ocial capital ... refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action'. Coleman's and Putnam's approaches contrast with Bourdieu's and Lin's conceptualization of the relational attributes of social capital as an aggregation of resources that are embedded in particular social networks. Social capital in this sense 'must be *distinguished* from collective assets and goods such as culture, norms, trust, and so on' (Lin 2001: 26). In referring to social capital as a means of 'investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions' Lin (2001: 29) focuses on the network dimension of facilitating social relationships. Through these relations in particular and therefore in limited networks an individual may access, mobilize or manipulate embedded resources including information, influence and credentials.

SEE ALSO:

Bourdieu, Pierre; Coleman, James S.; Cultural Capital; Human capital; Network Theory; Trust

References and Further Reading

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