

Social Capital Theory

<http://www2.chass.ncsu.edu/garson/pa765/socialcapital.htm>

Social capital may be defined as those resources inherent in social relations which facilitate collective action. Social capital resources include trust, norms, and networks of association representing any group which gathers consistently for a common purpose. A norm of a culture high in social capital is reciprocity, which encourages bargaining, compromise, and pluralistic politics. Another norm is belief in the equality of citizens, which encourages the formation of cross-cutting groups.

Key Concepts and Terms

Correlates of high levels of social capital include education (Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995; Teachman, Paasch, and Carver, 1996), health (Smith, 1997), confidence in political

institutions (Brehm and Rahn, 1997), and satisfaction with government and political engagement (Putnam, 1993). Mentoring, job networking, and mutual support associated with high levels of

social capital is a partial cause of success in education (Loury, 1977; Coleman, 1988). Such mutual support also is associated with self-reliant economic development without need for government

intervention (Putnam, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995).

The decline of social capital is a theme of social capital theory. Articulated by Putnam (1993, 1995a, 1995), the argument is made that the level of social capital has been declining in the United states at least since the 1970's.

Factors in the decline of social capital centrally include television, which is seen as having a profound privatizing impact which undercuts social capital in a society (Putnam, 1995a).

The role of information technology is seen as bidirectional. High levels of social capital, such as preexisting strong non-electronic networks, is a success factor in establishment of

electronic-based networks (Fukuyama, 1995). At the same time, the spread of information technology creates networking infrastructure which encourages the formation of social capital (Calabrese

and Borchert, 1996). Information technology, however, can also have an anonymizing, deindividuating effect which relaxes social norms and erodes social capital (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire,

1991; Loeh and Conger, 1996). It is a mixed empirical question which tendency of information technology will be dominant.

Relation to public administration/public policy. Implementation of government programs ultimately depends less on authority and control than on mobilizing policy stakeholders, including

policy recipients. The less the social capital, the more difficult such mobilization becomes. At the extreme, in a society with very low social capital, administrators are much more apt to find reliance

on authority and control necessary, with resulting low governmental effectiveness. At the other extreme, in a society with very high social capital, many problems are taken care of by social

networking outside of government, and when remaining problems are addressed through governmental intervention, administrators find a rich array of implementation allies.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is social capital theory new?

Yes and no. The terminology is new, as is the concern for recent technologies. Social capital theory, however, has deep roots in theorists who have emphasized the relation between pluralistic

associational life and American democracy. These theorists include James Madison (writing in *The Federalist* on "factions"), Alexis de Tocqueville (the French traveler in the 1830's who wrote

Democracy in America), and, indeed, many authors in the dominant, pluralist tradition in American political science (see G. David Garson, *Group theories of politics*).

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Jackman, Robert W. and Ross A. Miller (1998). Social capital and politics. *The Annual Review of Political Science*, Volume 1, 1998. The authors evaluate recent studies of social capital in

political science and argue they have strayed considerably from the original treatment of social capital as an endogenous variable. Rather, they note, recent writers have recast social capital as a feature of political culture and thereby treat it, like cultural values generally, as exogenous variables. they argue the endogenous and exogenous models are based on incompatible premises and have fundamentally different implications. The authors find that empirical tests of the exogenous social capital approach are deficient and they urge a return to the treatment of social capital as endogenous.

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