OVERVIEW OF THE ‘SOCIAL CAPITAL’: ITS RELEVANCE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES CONFERENCE

Pojam socijalnog kapitala: relevantnost i implikacije za konferenciju o lokalnim zajednicama

APSTRAKT Ovaj prilog ima za cilj da pruži, iako parcijalan, pregled pitanja i tema koje su razmatrane tokom Konferencije. Koncept socijalnog kapitala pruža mogućnost objašnjavanja i/ili praktičnog suočavanja sa promenama u načinu života savremenog društva, koje se sve češće označavaju »rizičnim društvom« ako iz sasvim različitih razloga u zavisnosti od društvenog konteksta. Taj koncept omogućuje analitičko povezivanje porodice, zajednice i društva, kao i uspostavljanje kontrole i reda u praktičnoj implementaciji. Predstavljeni radovi obuhvatali su tri ključne perspektive: erozija socijalnog kapitala, njegove nove forme i povezanost sa kontinuiranim nejednakostima u društvu. Na Konferenciji su, takođe, razmatrane metode definisanja i oparcionalizacije socijalnog kapitala. Osnovi doprinos Konferencije može se sažeti zaključkom da su rasprave o konceptu, oblicima i efektima socijalnog kapitala od velike važnosti uprkos njihovoj kontekstualnosti.

KLJUČNE REČI socijalni kapital, porodica, lokalna zajednica, društvo

ABSTRACT Paper presents the partial and idiosyncratic concluding overview of issues raised and discussed during the conference. In different contexts the turn to social capital seems to be a response to feelings that society is ‘at risk’ in the face of radical change (albeit in quite different ways). Under these circumstances, social capital offers a particular sort of explanation of, and remedy for dealing with, perceived changes in the way we live. Conceptually social capital provides a link between families, communities and society, and practically it promises order and control. Three over-reaching perspectives on social capital were represented in the conference papers: erosion, new forms, and continued inequalities. Also, methods in defining social capital and its operationalisation have been subject to much debate. The contributions to the ‘Social capital’ conference show that debates about the nature, forms and effects of social capital are highly relevant across contexts.

KEY WORDS social capital, family, local community, society
Introduction

Academics themselves are reliant on social capital. We are involved in the process of networking, making new contacts and reinforcing old ones, exchanging information, and generally using – or accumulating for potential use – social connections that will help maintain and advance our academic endeavours in various ways. My attendance at the ‘Social capital: its relevance and implications for local communities’ conference was brought about in just such a way. Smiljka Tomanović knew a colleague of mine – Julia Brannen – with whom I co-edit a journal, and while Smiljka was on a scholarly visit to her, Julia put her in contact with me. We shared an interest in researching parents’ and children’s perspectives on family and community lives, and kept in touch. On a subsequent visit, Smiljka invited myself and another colleague, Val Gillies, to come to the Institute for Sociological Research at Belgrade University, and arranged this to coincide with a conference she was organising on social capital. The new contacts that I made there have already born fruit too.

As well as practising social capital myself, I also study it. I am Director of the Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group, which is undertaking a five-year programme of research on the inter-relationships between the dynamics of family and social change and processes of social capital (see www.lsbu.ac.uk/families), involving 11 core empirical projects. It is from this perspective that I provided the partial and idiosyncratic concluding overview of issues raised and discussed during the conference, which is reconstructed here.

I found the conference extremely stimulating, and it reinforced for me the intensely politicised nature of social capital as a concept, rather than merely an aid to academic analysis and explanation. In the UK, this politicisation has largely focused on the values and behaviour of people in families and local communities, at least in terms of policy interventions, as Val Gillies’ piece makes clear in relation to parenting. In the East European countries represented in this collection, the focus is more on institutional structures and supports in the post-communist/transitional era, as the other contributions testify. The contrast between Val Gillies’ and Siyka Kovatcheva’s concerns about the resources and flows of support in parenting children and young people are instructive here too. In both contexts, though, the turn to social capital seems to be a response to feelings that society is ‘at risk’ in the face of radical change (albeit in quite different ways) – a sense of concern about what is arising from past and current actions, and about what will be encountered in the future. Under these circumstances, social capital offers a particular sort of explanation of, and remedy for dealing with, perceived changes in the way we live, work and relate to each other. Conceptually social capital provides a link between families, communities and society, and practically it promises order and control.
Perspectives on social capital

There are three over-reaching perspectives on social capital and its workings, and each of these was represented in the conference papers: erosion, new forms, and continued inequalities.

The first approach, focusing on and surveying erosion, is a ‘social capital lost’ story. It is the most dominant story, and has been most influential politically in the West. The perspective is best represented in the work of James Coleman (1990) and Robert Putnam (2000). What is termed the ‘breakdown’ of traditional family forms is seen as either the key or an important part of fragmentation of social capital more widely in society. The process of social capital building within families is regarded as linked to social capital as a resource outside them in communities, creating a dense social structure of cohesive norms, extensive trust and obligations. In this view, changing family structures and rising divorce, mothers’ labour market participation, increasing youth-oriented media and leisure activities, and so on, mean that an older, civically active generation is being replaced with a younger one whose stocks of social capital are reduced. Aleksandar Štulhofer’s piece about social capital in Croatia, in terms of its substantive focus, traces a decline (although he has caveats to make about the methods involved in this charting, on which see below), while Smiljka Tomanović’s identification of children’s increased television viewing in Serbia does not bode well for social capital from this perspective.

The second perspective on social capital is more of a ‘new golden age’ story, with its relationship to changing family forms regarded in a more positive light. This approach is most evident in the work of Anthony Giddens (1991) and Jeffrey Weeks (1995). Family diversity is seen as generating new forms of social allegiance with a greater emphasis on negotiated consensual relationships and obligations, and as opening up space for a flowering of social capital in new and transformed ways. Traditional kinship bonds and family values are seen as characteristically limited in providing the experimental resources for people to be able to cope with an uncertain and changing world. In this view, trust and reciprocity become differently constituted and practiced, based on reflexivity and negotiation rather than prescribed and regulated obligations. Slobodan Čvejić’s reference to the need for people learn and practice the ‘new rules of the game’ in Serbia after political change, and Andelka Milić’s discussion of the emergence of horizontal, collateral descent features in the growth of extended families in the country during the 1990s, each speak to this perspective in some way.

The third approach is a ‘plus ca change’ story, although it is far more muted in most discussions of social capital. It is most evident in Pierre Bourdieu’s work as part of his wider theorisation of capitals (1986). From this perspective, the focus on change in family life in relation to social capital – whether for ill or good – is
regarded as overplayed. Both are seen as still shaped by structural features of life implicating social class, gender, ethnicity and so on. People derive their social capital from their membership of a group, such as a family or kinship group, and social capital is ubiquitous, rather than decreasing or increasing, and continually being transmitted and accumulated in ways that reproduce social inequalities. Val Gillies’ piece points to the ways that gender and social class continue to be significant in enabling and delineating parents’ access to various kinds of resources and assistance, while Smiljka Tomanović’s analysis of children’s social capital highlights their continued marginalisation as minors from civic engagement.

Methods in researching social capital

Methods in capturing social capital have been subject to much debate about its definition and operationalisation. This includes concerns about whether what is captured is tautological in being treated as both cause and effect, issues about measuring outcomes rather than processes, and whether it can be subject to a universal definition and measurement or needs to take account of context and social group. The diversity of interpretations even within mainstream approaches, has led to a lack of consensus about what precisely constitutes social capital, so that the gathering and analysis of statistical information about its presence or absence is problematic. (See discussions in Baron 2004; Edwards 2004; Molyneux 2002; Morrow 1999; Portes 1998.) Such concerns were also evident in the contributions to the conference. Aleksandar Štulhofer draws attention to the methodological problems of validity in macro-level surveys of social capital, while Siyka Kovatcheva notes the way that in-depth studies may help to explain sometimes conflicting survey data, and Dimitrina Mihaylova’s commentary reinforces the importance of context.

Overall, Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of the ‘construction of the object’ seems apposite (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). He argued that unless researchers themselves construct the objects of their research, then they are left dealing with objects that have been preconstructed within narrow approaches and agenda by powerful interests. In this construction process, researchers need to bring to together theory and method, rather than allowing research to be driven by method. This raises issues that are touched on in this collection, in terms of being driven by influential large-scale surveys devised and constructed by others within particular frameworks. *De facto* statistical indicators are being created that have come to take on a life of their own (Ponthieux 2002), independent of context and their illuminative or explanatory value within this.
Conclusion

The contributions to the ‘Social capital’ conference, both in terms of the presentations delivered and participants’ discussion of them – with the former now evidenced in this volume – show that debates about the nature, forms and effects of social capital are highly relevant across contexts. The collection also testifies to the quality of work that is being carried out by academics in East European countries, addressing a diversity of pertinent issues concerning its relevance and implications for families and local communities.
References


