

A review on Robert Putnam's theory about social capital

Mohammad Mahdi Bahar¹, Sima Farid Kian²

¹Master of Sociology, Islamic Azad University, Department of sociology, Arak, Iran, Email:

Mohamadmahdibahar57@yahoo.com, Tel: 09125339154

²Phd Student of Cultural Planning, The University of Khuzazmy, Department of Social Science, International Pardis, Tehran, Iran, Email: Sima.faridkian@yahoo.com, Tel: 09124116322

Abstract: Social capital is an expression normally used in everyday conversations, although there might be an ambiguous picture of it in minds. Social capital is an old concept, however, it is the only expression well-invented recently (Portes and Sensenbrenner-1993; Putnam-1995; Bankstone and Zhou-2002; Labonte-1999; Lazega and Pattison-2001). Social capital is closely yoked with concepts like civil society and social relationships (Adam and Roncevic-2003). This issue also accords theories of writers such as Dourkheim, Simmel, Marx, Weber, and other hypotheses like Social Interaction and Organizational Commitment (Watson and Papamarcos-2002). The new advances of the concept of social capital is rooted in three key compilations of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam together with some others involving the Multidisciplinary Approach. To put it simply, Putnam defines social capital as follows: it is made of features of a social organization such as trust, norms, and networks which improve the performance and practicality of the society through facilitating cooperative actions. In this article, the writer tries to study Robert Putnam's views about social capital.

[Mohammad Mahdi Bahar, Sima Farid Kian. **A review on Robert Putnam's theory about social capital.** *J Am Sci* 2014;10(1s):39-41]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org>. 8

Keywords: Pierre Bourdieu's theory; social capital; social sciences

Introduction:

From the late 80s, when Coleman, Bourdieu, and Putnam introduced the concept of social capital into the world of social sciences, till today social capital has been still dominant over the world's scientific areas, especially sociology and political sciences. Nowadays, social capital is being made use of in addition to human, financial and economic capitals. This concept is believed to aim at links and relationships among the members of a network as a valuable source which makes it possible for them to fulfill their goals by creating norms and mutual trust. In other words, mobilizing the sources, social capital in general is a mixture of networks and opportunities helping to solve a great deal of social and political problems. Social capital acts as a treatment for negative repercussions resulting from a lack in social solidarity and integrity, and a decline in social coherence.

Needless to say, social capital appears to be a way to consolidate the sense of collaboration, attain required economic growth, enhance sanitation and hygiene, develop technology, alleviate poverty, control crime, and bring social segregation to an end. In addition, social capital is simultaneously both the prerequisite and result of democratic social processes.

In 1990, coming up with a different approach, Robert Putnam entered the area of social capital, and of course, brought a resounding success to it. As a matter of fact, he started his work with an issue which he called "the danger of civil damage in the

USA". He believed that those positive points that Tocqueville used in the 19th century about America's civil society were gradually petering out; features like people's serious cooperation in keeping the civil society and the existence of social relationships beyond friendships and being relatives. To formulate this issue, Putnam used the concept of social capital. He says that social capital targets interpersonal communication, social networks, mutual norms, reciprocity, and being trustworthy (Putnam-2000).

A review on theories about social capital by Robert Putnam:

In the late 1960s, the concept of social capital became well known, was used by the International Bank under the name of a research program, and appeared to be the main subject of a great number of books, including *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam. In recent years, one of the most complicated studies on civic superiority in political sciences has been done by Putnam and his colleagues based on democracy (Putnam-1993). Their main interest was in surveying the relation between the modern economy and fundamental activities. What they could manage to discover through their studies on civic traditions of modern Italy was a strong correlation among the activities of political organizations and a type of civic life – what they called civil society (Putnam-1993). The societies were recognized via: social commitment, political equality, coherence, trust, being moderate, and organized social life. Thus, Putnam and colleagues were able to put forward all

the data gained from different parts of Italy. They knew that there could be a clear border drawn between civil and uncivil areas, and that general issues could now be planned more successfully than before (Putnam-1993).

He concluded that democracy and economic systems work better with the presence of an independent and durable tradition of social commitment (Beem-1999). Doubtlessly, the mechanisms through which social commitments and relationships create positives such as better schooling systems, faster economic growth, less crime, and more effective governments are of greater importance. While they briefly explain the findings, there is still a strong need for approvals or maybe some alterations. To understand these phenomena, experts in many fields have recently rendered a common framework relying on social capital (Granovetter-1985; Coleman-1990). In comparison with the concepts of physical and human capitals – the tools increasing personal productivity – social capital is a complex of social networks, norms, and social trust which make it easier to be more harmonious and cooperate to achieve mutual profits.

For a great number of reasons, living in a society or a real source of social capital truly means happiness. Firstly, networks of social commitments develop expanded powerful mutual norms of reciprocity and lead to social trust. The networks then facilitate connections and cooperation and increase credits, thus resulting in the elimination of ambiguities in public activities. When political and economic negotiations take place in strong networks of social mutual actions, the situations of opportunism decrease. Meanwhile, the networks of social commitment count on previous successes as a backdrop for future cooperation. Eventually, strong networks begin to expand their common sense – developing “I” into “we” – or from the viewpoint of theorists of Wise Choice, they increase a common interest in mutual profits.

While physical capital focuses on physical objectivities and human capital on personal skills, social capital points out interpersonal relationships – implicated in social networks, norms, and trustworthiness. On the one hand, is closely related with something called civic superiority. Social capital highlights that civic superiority is much stronger when limited in networks of mutual social relationships. A society with high levels of morality yet isolated members does not necessarily have a considerable profitable social capital (Putnam-2000). In other words, mutual actions make people able to create communities and be committed to one another and the unity of the social structure. Feeling and experiencing to be a member and creator of social

networks and also trust-based relationships bring people a great deal of profit. Putnam talks about two main parts of the concept of social capital: “bonding” and “bridging” invented by Ross Gittel and Avis Vidal. Social capital is about the values of social networks, bonding homogeneous groups of people – sharing similar demographic characteristics – and bridging diverse people, with norms of reciprocity. A typical example could be criminal gangs, who create bonding social capital, whereas choirs and bowling clubs (hence the title, Putnam lamented their decline) create bridging social capital.

For Putnam, one of the most common types of social capital is trust. The higher the level of trust between two people, the more reciprocity is resulted. One of the features of social capital is that like trust, norms, and networks it is normally public. Putnam believes that social capital is similar to social structures as the members of a social structure, making the most of it, are not its private owners.

Putnam argues that social capital is used to achieve social and political developments in political systems. Social capital is a combination of sources created by interpersonal relationships of the members of social networks, social norms of reciprocity, and trust. Social capital clearly indicates features of an organization and/or a social structure, and facilitates coordination and cooperation. Social capital is the indicator of identity and credit of a society persuading people to reach specific goals and interact through creating trust. The main elements of social capital are commitment, trust, common norms and values, honesty, and social interactions.

Conclusion:

For Putnam, social capital is resulted from a mixture of values and norms present in intellectual, scientific, social, economic, cultural, and political systems in a society. And these norms and values are produced by the effects of our social and economic organizations which have features like mutual trust, social interactions, the feeling of belonging to a group.

Putnam’s opinion about social capital reminds us of Tocqueville’s idea about democracy and public life in America. As far as Putnam is concerned, concept such as: moral necessities, common cultures, unifying social behaviors, the creation of social trust at its heart – what some a majority of contemporary writers call social capital – cultural relationships, common norms of reciprocity, and mutual respect are elements of social capital at national level, and nowadays known as means of facilitating cooperation, especially in international trades, and also something that enhances human rights at

international level which itself is an element of behavioral and social development.

Putnam believes that social capital is a combination of concepts such as trust, norms, and networks which create relationships and enhanced cooperation in a society and eventually produces their mutual profits. For him, mutual trust and reciprocity among the members of a network are the source of mutual actions in the society. His main emphasis is on the concept of trust, and he holds the view that creating trust among people, statesmen, and the political elite will finally lead to political development.

Corresponding Author:

Mohammad Mahdi Bahar

Master of Sociology, Islamic Azad University,
Department of sociology, Arak, Iran, Email:
Mohamadmahdibahar57@yahoo.com

References

1. Beem,C(1999): The Necessity for Politics.Reclaming American public Life, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
2. Lazega,E.Pattison.P.H.(2001) Social capital as a Social mechanisms and Collective Assesst:the Example of status auctions among colleagues,in Social Capital theoty and Research.Edited by Ronad Burt. New York.Aldine de Gruyter. pp:185-208
3. Adam,F. Roncevic,B(2003) Social Capital: Recent Debates and research trends:Social Science information.42.pp155-183
4. Bankston, C.Zhuo,M(2002)Social capital as a Process: the meaning and Problems of a Theorical Metaphor, Sociological Inquiry, 72, pp:285-317.
5. Granovetter, M(1985), Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddendness. American Journal of Sociology,91.
6. Labonte,R(1999) Social capital and Community Development. Australianand new Zealand Journal of Public Health.23.pp:430-433.
7. Portes. A. Sensenbrenner,J (1993), Embeddedness and Immigration: notes on the Social Determinants of economic action. American journal of Sociology.98.pp:1320-1350
8. Putnam, R, D(2000) Bowling Alone : Americas Declining Social Capital.The Journal Democracy, 6 :19.
9. Putnam, R, D(1993) :The prosperous Community-Social Capitaland Public Life, American Prospect. 13.p:36.
10. Waston,G. Papamarcos,S(2002)Social Capital and Organizational Commitment.Journal of Business and Spycology.16.pp:537-552.
11. Coleman,J.S.(1990):Functions of Social Theory, Cambridge MA. Harvard University Press

1/7/2014