



Contributing to social capital: An investigation of Asian immigrants' use of public library services



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1. Introduction

Public institutions are considered the most efficient generators of social capital, with public libraries ideally situated and suited to be such generators (Vårheim, 2007). Social capital is the “social networks and associated norms of reciprocity... [which] create value, both individual and collective” (Putnam & Goss, 2002, p. 8). In this context, the role of public libraries can be seen to be changing: Today, they not only collect, curate, and provide access to materials, but also they provide spaces for facilitating social activities. For example, public libraries promote the acquisition of skills related to digital access and literacy (McKrell, 2014); they are a place to meet and interact socially (Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010; Smeaton & Davis, 2014a); moreover, they trigger social capital formation through community involvement (Johnson, 2010). Social capital is regarded as “intrinsic to social functioning” and a measure of interactions between people in society (Cox, 2002, p. 337). Social capital is an essential community resource that may lead to trust, coordination, and cooperation for mutual benefit (Hutchinson & Vidal, 2004; Putnam, 1995). From immigrants' points of view, social capital and social networks are important aspects of settlement (Kindler, Ratcheva, & Piechowska, 2015). Settlement is defined as

The complex process of adjusting to a new environment following migration. It is a long-term process affecting all immigrants... Its end point is the acceptance by and the feeling of belonging to the receiving society. It implies change both in the individual immigrant and the host society (Galbally, 1978, p. 29).

Integration is part of successful settlement and social capital is vital to integration (Kindler et al., 2015). Integration, a key component of multiculturalism, occurs when people in a new country maintain their old culture while at the same time learning about and adapting to the new culture (Berry, 2001). Healthy social capital helps immigrants with the common challenges they face in the settlement process, such as using English, finding (good) jobs, and establishing social networks (Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004; Fisher, Marcoux, Miller, Sánchez, & Cunningham, 2004).

Generally, “international migrants include anyone living outside their country of citizenship” (Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010, p. 495). Australia is a country with a significant number of immigrants by birth. The census data suggests that the total number of immigrants in South Australia has increased by 4.8% from 2001 to 2011, with the proportion of Asian immigrants increasing significantly from 9.5% (2001) to 19.8% (2011). The census further shows that the five Asian countries primarily contributing to this influx are China, India, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia (more detailed analysis can be found in Khoir, Du, and Koronios (2015c)). The population for this study is drawn from these immigrants and defined as those who were born overseas, migrated to and are living in Australia permanently. Given that this population arrives largely under specific schemes and programmes that select highly skilled people (Jakubowicz, 2011), they arrive with human capital that they are transferring from their homeland to their newly adopted country. According to Keeley (2007, p. 3), human capital is “the knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes that allow people to contribute to their personal and social well-being, as well as that of their countries” (p. 3). How these skills will help them to adapt to their settlement process is yet to be discovered. The relationship to public libraries should also be analyzed; the library as a public institution is mandated to cater to its multicultural clients. It is recognized that there are at least five language and cultural groups within this population. There are likely to be differences between their ethnic and cultural experiences. However, their socio-economic backgrounds are assumed to be broadly similar, as well as their individual willingness to embrace a new country and culture.

South Australia has approximately 130 public libraries. It is their mandate to help immigrants gain access to information resources and provide them with community access. When creating programs, public libraries should consider the particular needs of immigrants, such as technology preferences, the need for language programs, and backgrounds and daily experiences, in order to facilitate a supportive settlement process (Audunson, Essmat, & Aabø, 2011; Komito, 2011). Social

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capital can be manifested in a public library through informal exchanges and interactions between individuals and their community, helping individuals solve problems and thereby building trust (Hillenbrand, 2005; Johnson, 2012).

2. Social capital: A study concept

Social capital is conceptualized based on the area of focus, but generally, it is seen as either a societal, an individual, or both societal and individual point of view, as a result of bonding and bridging social networks (Johnson, 2015). According to Putnam and Goss (2002), social networks involve social capital and human capital (the sum of an individual's skills); they create value for the individual and society generally. Putnam (2007) distinguishes between bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital emerges between people who share a commonality (ethnicity, for example) and potentially may result in exclusivity. Bridging social capital however, brings different people together (Johnson, 2012; Vårheim, 2007, 2011). Strong social capital fosters the development of a healthy and cohesive community (Johnson, 2012). Moreover, social capital is gradually built by new networks from more distant relationships that create higher quality resources compared to strong ties such as family and close friends (Johnson, 2015). As a result, it is found that people with broader links and more diverse ties tend to have more opportunities, and tend to be happier and healthier (Erickson, 2003). The development of generalized trust allows for these bridges and linkages that go beyond class, education and ethnicity (Vårheim, 2007). A key element of social capital is that it is transferable and may have unintended consequences: Trust learned in one situation may extend to other situations as the networks expand (Carrington, McIntosh, & Walmsley, 2007).

The concept of social capital, along with its associated human capital, has become an important tool in discussing integration, community development and social inclusion, in the context of immigrants. Social capital triggers the increase of trust and human capital by dealing with the bonds between close relationships, the bridges that link more distant acquaintances, and the linkages forged between broad groups within society (Keeley, 2007; Putnam, 2007). Such kinds of bonding and bridging can be found in the services of public institutions. Therefore, public services, including public libraries, are seen as universal and safe places (Vårheim, 2011) that support the formation of social capital. Vårheim (2014, p. 63) argues that “among public institutions, public libraries in particular contribute to increased generalized trust, a core component of social capital, among immigrants” (p. 63). Moreover, that trust indicates successful integration for immigrants (Vårheim, 2007). An experience of natural togetherness is potentially generated through the library for immigrant groups who are often considered to have low social capital (Putnam, 2007). This study is conceptualized through the perspectives of social capital within the role of public institutions to support Asian immigrants' settlement. In accord with Berry's (2001) society of settlement concept, which includes cultural boundaries and social relationships, this study sees settlement as an umbrella term that incorporates integration, social capital, and multiculturalism as its important supporting components.

3. Problem statement

Research suggests that public libraries are ideally positioned to play an important role in solving the challenges of multiculturalism in countries with large numbers of immigrants (Audunson et al., 2011). These countries need to manage and focus on those immigrants as the specific group of people voluntarily moving to another country for such general purposes such as economy, family, and a better life (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2005; Walsh & Horenczyk, 2001). The challenge is both to build a harmonious cultural community and to facilitate the expression of immigrants' own cultural backgrounds. Social inclusion and respect for diversity are essential.

Immigrants normally aspire to adapt to their new culture and environment (Putnam, 2007), and public libraries are believed to play a critical role in facilitating this process (Caidi & Allard, 2005).

Public libraries, while remaining relevant to all users, are required to meet diverse user needs in adapting and achieving settlement (Audunson et al., 2011). Public libraries, by virtue of their mandate, are ideal generators of social capital for immigrant populations (Vårheim, 2011). Though several studies have discussed the relationships between public libraries, immigrants, and social capital, few studies explore how library services can expedite the generation of social capital and enhance human capital for a particular group of immigrants, notably from the immigrants' perspective. The relationship between a public library and the local community should be strong and mutually supportive if it is to help immigrants overcome the challenges they face such as using English, finding jobs, and expanding friendships. Reflecting on these challenges and the role of public libraries for immigrants, the following general questions emerged: Do Asian immigrants access the services provided by the public library system? Are they aware of the facilities offered and do they wish for improvement in the delivery of various services? How can the use of library services generate social capital? Specifically, how do public library services assist Asian immigrants and lead to the creation of social capital that supports their settlement. Libraries are facilitators of social capital and support positive outcomes of immigrant settlement. These possible outcomes include network expansion, higher skill levels, or successful integration with broad society. However, libraries are not a direct causal determinant. Rather, they foster diverse, multi-dimensional relationships within a cohesive society. The research questions address how and how well the library helps create a cohesive society in relation to immigrants:

- RQ1. What public library services do Asian immigrants use?
- RQ2. What are Asian immigrants' further expectations of public libraries?
- RQ3. Do the public library services foster the development of social capital? If yes, how is this achieved? If no, why not?

This research provides insights into a number of areas: the use of public library services by immigrants; immigrants' needs and expectations of library services; and the generation and value of social capital for social inclusion and integration in a multicultural society. The findings are significant for several reasons. Firstly, they provide a better understanding of how public libraries contribute to social capital development during the settlement process of Asian immigrants. Secondly, they raise awareness of public library services available to immigrants. Finally, the results may be useful in reframing strategic plans to serve immigrant groups by focusing more on their needs.

4. Literature review

4.1. Public libraries and social capital

Public libraries are spaces where members of a community can meet, discuss, and explore ideas as well as gain access to information (Smeaton & Davis, 2014a). As Hoyer (2011) states, it is the mandate of the library to serve its users and therefore it must constantly evolve in response to user needs. The literature examining the generation of social capital and its role in creating an inclusive and cohesive society is steadily growing (Johnson, 2012; Vårheim, 2007). Social capital is considered to reside in a generalized trust (Vårheim, 2007). The trust is a product of “norms and networks of civic engagement”, underpinning the workings of an efficient, transparent, productive, caring, and healthy society (Putnam & Goss, 2002). Therefore, social capital can be built by universal social institutions such as public libraries, and the extension of social networks beyond the familial. When immigrants use a public library they may see how helpful the librarians are, how many activities and resources are available for them, and how they are able to mingle and interact with

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