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ANALYSIS

Social capital in community level environmental governance: A critique

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ARTICLE DATA

Article history:

Received 4 July 2008

Received in revised form

3 November 2008

Accepted 3 November 2008

Available online 26 December 2008

Keywords:

Social capital

Collective action

Power relations

Common knowledge

Symbolic power

Human agency

ABSTRACT

Social capital is often claimed to facilitate collective action regarding the management of complex environmental goods and services. However, there is little systematic analysis in the literature that explains the way social capital aids in fostering collective action. The paper integrates ideas from institutional ecological economics, sociology and anthropology to argue that power relations, involving struggle and resistance, should be acknowledged as they affect collective action. We address the question of why social capital should not be straightforwardly associated positively with common property resource management. To unravel the complexity of the links between social capital, collective action and common property resource management, the concepts of *common knowledge* and *symbolic power* are introduced.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the concept of social capital¹ has gathered increased attention in the literature about common pool resource (CPR) management and collective action, especially in relation to sustainable use of natural resources and sustainable development (e.g. Ostrom, 2000; Lehtonen, 2004). Social capital is often defined as ‘features of social organization such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination and co-operation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1993, pp. 35–36). This concept is associated with incentive mechanisms or institutional arrangements to curb individuals’ incentive to free-ride regarding the provision of public goods (Ostrom, 2000; Aoki, 2001). It is also generally argued that the existence of

networks among agents and the dense flow of information among them lower the transaction costs of creating collective action (Putnam, 1993; Ostrom, 2000; Pretty and Ward, 2001; Collier, 2002; Paavola and Adger, 2005).

However, these institutionalist arguments have also been criticised due to their incapacity to explain why social capital has this intrinsic ability to curb such perverse incentives and lower transaction costs (Harris, 2001; Cleaver, 2003; Mosse, 2006). Critics argue that the institutional angle cannot explain why some communities succeed in creating collective action while others fail to do so despite the existence of networks and a dense flow of information. As governments and markets fail, communities can fail as well (Ostrom, 1990a; McCay and Jentoft, 1998; Jentoft, 2000; Bowles and Gintis, 2002; Acheson,

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¹ This paper does not argue whether social capital should be termed ‘capital’ or not. Solow (1999) and Arrow (1999) argue that social capital is a by-product rather than deliberate investment. Perhaps a better term, following McNiell (2007), would be *sociality*. However, considering the popularity of the concept and the fact that it is one of the fields where interdisciplinary conversation is taking place, we use the term social capital throughout the paper.

2006). Social capital can impact negatively on economic or environmental outcomes creating exclusion of some marginalised groups or contributing to rule breaking behaviour by community members as citation (Agrawal, 2001; Portes, 1993; Carroll and Stanfield, 2003; van Steveren, 2003; Ray and Bijarnia, 2007). The causal relationship between social capital and environmental outcomes through governance of collective action is far from clear and often tautological (Durlauf, 2002; Sobel, 2002; Lehtonen, 2004; Ballet et al., 2007). The current theories of social capital cannot sufficiently open the black box linking collective action and CPR management (Fine, 2001; Harris, 2001).

This paper aims to theoretically address the question of how social capital may help to foster collective action making use of the concepts of *common knowledge* as defined by Chwe (1999) and *symbolic power*, *sensu* Bourdieu (1990). By bringing these two concepts together, we argue that the creation of collective action is not just the result of rational calculation about how much to invest in collective action by individuals but also a result of power relations and social structure.²

The existence of power in the creation of knowledge has been fiercely debated between Foucault and Habermas (see Kelly, 1994).³ Foucault (1965) argued that the creation of knowledge/rationality itself is a historical and social construct which legitimises the existing power relations and social structure. Following this line of argument, it can be argued that power structures deprive the voice of the powerless and their ability to express themselves by categorizing their voice as irrational (Guha and Spivak, 1988). Habermas (1984) instead pointed out that it is possible to make a normative distinction between legitimate and illegitimate use of power through communicative rationality. The latter argument has led to the discussion on 'public sphere' and discursive democracy which has been recently introduced in environmental evaluation methodologies (e.g. Dryzek, 1990; Goodin, 1996).⁴ Further,

² We limit our argument to community level power relations and social structure. In the last section we briefly look into the outside powers that can influence institutional outcomes. Formal institutions such as governments at various levels can have a strong influence on environmental governance and the formulation of social capital and collective action (see: Ostrom, 1990a; Acheson, 2006). However this debate is beyond the scope of this paper. In addition, we use the concept of social structure interchangeably with institutions. Although Hodgson (2000) distinguishes between social structure and institutions by defining institutions as social structure that have 'recursive downward causation', i.e. capacity to structure human agency. However, we cannot imagine a social structure that does not structure human agents. Both social structures and institutions shape the human agencies in one way or another. Thus in this paper we use these term interchangeably.

³ Although physical debate did not take place between Habermas and Foucault, Habermas went through many debates with other post-modernist thinkers, e.g. Derrida and Deleuze (Villa, 1992). In terms writing, both authors wrote about their opponents and the authors believe that in this debate between Habermas and Foucault that the issue of power became most apparent.

⁴ Although discursive democratic approaches provide an alternative to neoclassical monetary valuation approaches such as CVM, the Foucauldian criticism of the 'public sphere' claims that not all the members of the community have the same opportunities to voice out their preferences in the 'public sphere', i.e. Subalterns cannot speak (Spivak, 1988; Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1992; Kohn, 2000).

institutional economists tend to use the Habermasian concept of communicative rationality, whereas anthropologists and sociologists tend to deny rationality itself by relying on the Foucauldian argument. While this debate is outside the scope of this paper we argue that power relations influence the way preferences by individuals are shaped through the creation of so-called 'common knowledge' and collective action, an approach not tackled by institutionalist analysis of CPR (Ray and Bijarnia, 2007). In this vein we hope to contribute to the analysis of power within the pluralistic perspective of ecological economics.

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section we provide a description of the roadmap linking social capital and collective action using a simple conceptual model. Section 3 introduces the concept of 'social embeddedness' which gave birth to the theory of social capital. We discuss the way new institutional economists link CPR management which collective action and social capital. We point out that standard social capital theories suffer from both 'over-socialised' and 'under-socialised' models of human agency. Then in Section 4 we argue that incentive mechanisms for CPR management crafted by social capital do not necessarily lead to collective action. Instead, we argue that what is first needed is to focus on the ability of social capital to create a 'common knowledge'. The creation of common knowledge is associated with the capacity to represent individuals' preferences as if they were the preference of the entire community through 'symbolic power'. It follows that the existence of collective action cannot be considered just the result of pure rational calculation by individual community members. This discussion leads us in Section 5 to explore how common knowledge can be diffused among community members and how it may be challenged by some marginalised groups within the community leading to failure in fostering collective action. Then, in Section 6, we argue that bonding social capital can contribute to the creation of common knowledge whereas bridging social capital may contribute to its sharing. Further, the main point is that different combination of these two types of social capital in different contexts where the interpretation of the common knowledge takes place results in different environmental outcomes. The last section concludes by discussing the main

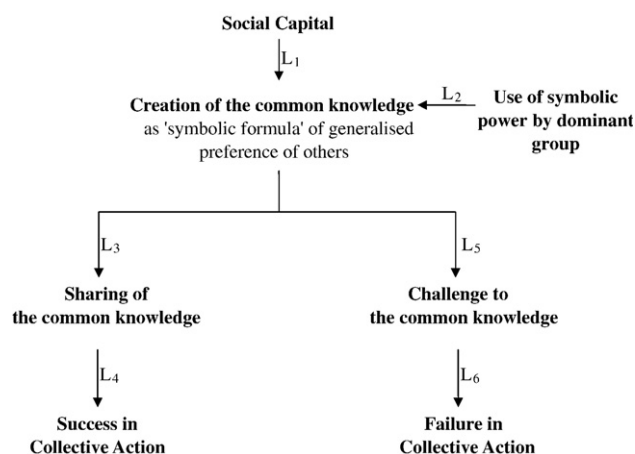


Fig. 1 – Conceptual framework of the role of social capital in fostering collective action.

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