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The front line of social capital creation – A natural experiment in symbolic interaction

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ABSTRACT

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This paper offers theoretical and empirical contributions to understanding the micro-sociological processes behind the creation of social capital. Theoretically, we argue that the emotional and shared experience of participating in symbolic interaction rituals may affect social capital in four different ways, via: (i) a 'citizenship' effect, connecting participants symbolically to the broader, civic society; (ii) a 'supportive' effect, bonding participants with each other; (iii) an exclusive 'tribal' effect, which crowds-out connections with other groups and the wider society; and (iv) an 'atomising' effect, whereby intense experiences create mental health problems that damage social capital.

We illustrate this with a case study of Australian veterans of the Vietnam War. The randomness of the National Service conscription lotteries of that era translates into a high-quality natural experiment. We formulate several hypotheses about which of the four effects dominates for veterans who participated in the 'symbolic interaction' of training and deployment. We test these hypotheses using data from the 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing, and the NSW 45 & Up Study.

We found that war service reduced 'bonding' social capital, but increased 'bridging' social capital, and this is not explained completely by mental health problems. This suggests that while the combined 'tribal' and 'atomizing' effects of service outweigh the 'supportive' effects, the 'citizenship' effect is surprisingly robust. Although they feel unsupported and isolated, veterans are committed to their community and country. These paradoxical findings suggest that social capital is formed through symbolic interaction. The *emotional* and *symbolic* qualities of interaction rituals may formulate non-strategic (perhaps irrational) connections with society *regardless* of the status of one's personal support networks.

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1. Introduction

Social capital is a theoretical concept designed to capture the strength, dynamics, exclusivity, and reliability of localized and widespread social networks. It operates on levels ranging from localized, and sometimes-exclusive groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1990; Portes and Landolt, 1996), to crisscrossing civic networks that overlay whole societies (Putnam, 2000). However, the *process* of building social capital is not well understood and most investigations omit a *micro-sociological* perspective on what builds social capital. This is curious, because classical micro-sociological theories on the formation of social ties long precede modern attempts to conceptualize and measure social capital.

Furthermore, modern sociological theories on emotions and micro-social interaction seem to be largely divorced from empirical studies into the creation of social capital.

This paper contributes both theoretically and empirically to an understanding of the process of social capital creation. On the theoretical side, we seek to reintegrate the social capital literature with the theory of symbolic interaction. We stress the role of shared emotional experiences and symbolic rituals in the process of forming social bonds. Emphasizing the multifaceted nature of social capital, we argue that participation in interaction rituals may have four separate effects on social capital creation: (i) a 'citizenship' effect, (ii) a 'supportive' effect, (iii) an exclusive 'tribal' effect, and (iv) an isolating 'mental health' effect.

We illustrate these ideas empirically with a case study of military service, focussing on Australian National Servicemen, many of whom were deployed to Vietnam. These veterans shared intense emotional experiences that could evoke all four of the social capital effects that we describe. These men were randomly induced into

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the army through the National Service conscription lotteries that were held during 1965–1972. These lotteries form a set of ‘natural experiments’ of the highest quality, akin to randomized control trials with imperfect compliance. Our empirical strategy closely follows the precedents set by a substantial multi-disciplinary literature in which conscription lotteries have been exploited as natural experiments (key examples include Hearst et al., 1986; Angrist, 1990; Angrist et al., 1996; Angrist et al., 2010, amongst numerous others). More recently, the Australian lotteries have been used to study the effects of army service on mortality (Siminski and Ville, 2011), employment (Siminski, 2013), crime (Siminski et al., 2013) and other outcomes (Siminski and Ville, 2012). See especially Siminski (2013), which argues for the strengths this natural experiment, including in an appendix with a detailed discussion of threats to validity.

The quasi-experimental component of our study draws on data from the 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing. We also employ a series of non-experimental regression models to explore the mechanisms involved in the association between military service and social participation. In particular, we examine the role of mental health in a Baron/Kenny-style mediation analysis. Our non-experimental analysis draws on the Sax Institute’s 45 & Up Study (45 and Up Study Collaborators, 2008).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on social capital creation including relevant micro-sociological theory. Section 3 describes the various types of social capital and how they have been operationalized empirically. Section 4 introduces our military service case study, with a focus on reviewing the existing literature on the relationship between military service, volunteering and social connections. Drawing on the theoretical sections of the paper, Section 5 outlines the hypothesized effects of military service on various forms of social capital, including the mediating effects of mental health. Section 6 describes methods and data. Section 7 presents results and Section 8 concludes.

2. What creates social capital? A micro-sociological perspective

Much work on the determinants of social capital has stressed the role of macro social factors. These include historical influences (e.g. Putnam, 1993, 2000), national demographic factors such as economic growth (Knack and Keefer, 1997) or welfare systems (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003; Patulny, 2010), or the influence of widespread social norms, such as trust in others (e.g. Uslaner, 2002; Stolle and Hooghe, 2004; Li et al., 2005; Sturgis et al., 2012). Research into individual-level causes of social capital has focused on associations with demographic characteristics, such as age (Arber et al., 2003; Patulny, 2009); marital status (Shapiro and Keyes, 2008; Patulny, 2012), education (Putnam, 2000); class and income (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2000; Li et al., 2005); health (Kawachi, 1999); ethnic integration (Nannestad et al., 2008), etc. Experimental evidence suggests that social capital can be fostered by facilitating social interaction (Feigenberg et al., 2013a, 2013b) or through other interventions (Pronyk et al., 2008).

Classical and modern micro-sociological perspectives on the role of symbolic interaction in creating social cohesion are, however, largely absent from this literature on social capital formation. Micro-sociology emphasizes shared emotional and symbolic experience in the formation of social bonds. The symbolic/emotional formation (or disintegration) of bonds was expounded in Durkheim’s (1961) study of religion, Simmel’s (1903) analysis of the development metropolitan, money-oriented character, and in Goffman’s ‘Interaction Ritual’ (1967), whereby ‘ritual solidarity’ is created through interaction and the investment of objects, symbols,

and ceremonies with sacred properties and emotional valence. Contemporary sociologists of emotions (Collins, 1975; Kemper, 1990; Barbalet and Lyon, 1994) argue that emotions are formed in and organize such human interaction, linking symbolism, social bonds, social structure and social action through a process of improvised, shared bodily co-presence and interaction.

These theories have two important implications. First, the symbolic quality of the interactions means that the emotional bonds *can transcend* group members. Participants in these interactions can develop close emotional ties and connections with symbols of the wider community, or the nation, *beyond* the group – often to an entity that the group is meant to serve (e.g. a church, sports fan base, political party, etc.). Second, the emotional and improvisational qualities of these interactions means that they *do not necessarily produce stable and supportive bonds between all the participants in a group, nor create connections between group members and persons in other groups or the wider society.*

2.1. Mental health and social capital

Symbolic interactions involve a degree of randomness, improvisation and play, as noted by Goffman (1967), and well developed in Bourdieu’s Theory of Habitus, Disposition and Field (1977). This allows for a breakdown in interaction rituals, which can lead to atomization and disconnection from a ‘normal’ way of life. This suggests a potentially strong link between social capital and mental health.

Social capital and health are generally positively associated, though determining the causal direction of this relationship is complicated (Hawthorne, 2008). Some research suggests that social capital and social networks have a protective role on health (Lochner et al., 2003) including mental health (De Silva et al., 2005; Berry and Welsh, 2009), though this is not a universal finding (Mansyur et al., 2008; Ellaway and Macintyre, 2007). Another strand of literature suggests that chronic health conditions and poor mental health increase the likelihood of perceived social isolation and lower social networks (see for example Adams et al., 2004; Hawthorne, 2008).

3. Types of social capital: theory and measurement

There are several traditions of social capital analysis, including Putnam’s (2000) communitarian/civil society tradition, Bourdieu’s (1986) critical tradition, and the organizational/network tradition (Granovetter, 1973; Coleman, 1990; Burt, 2005; Lin, 2002). Several papers have examined social capital critically across these traditions (Edwards et al., 2007; Li et al., 2008; Geys and Murdoch, 2008; Patulny and Svendsen, 2007). It is apparent from these reviews that no single tradition captures all aspects of social capital. However, a consensus has emerged (at least among empiricists) that the levels and effects of social capital are worth measuring (i.e. its value is not just metaphoric), and that certain indicators are appropriate for certain types of social capital (bonding and bridging) and within particular contexts. In this section we briefly summarize how we draw on these traditions for theorizing and measuring social capital.

3.1. Communitarian/civic-society tradition – bonding and bridging

Putnam’s ‘communitarian’ tradition distinguishes between localized informal connections and broader formal connections, in terms of bonding and bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000; Patulny and Svendsen, 2007). Putnam defines ‘bridging social capital’ as open networks that are “outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages”, while ‘bonding social capital’ consists of “inward-looking [networks that] tend to reinforce exclusive

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