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Is there a place for social capital in the psychology of health and place?

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Abstract

The field of environmental psychology is primely placed to further understanding of the way in which social capital influences or is influenced by the context and characteristics of neighbourhood environments, but has been one of the quieter voices in the cacophony of social capital discourse over the last decade. While there is increasing research interest in area and neighbourhood variations in social capital, the mechanisms and causal pathways through which physical environments, social capital and health may be related are not yet clear. More refined unpacking of the relationship between social capital and neighbourhood design, features and settings is required to identify practical intervention points for preserving, fostering and harnessing social capital within communities. Through a review of literature, this paper explores whether there is a place for social capital in the psychology of place and considers the contribution that environmental psychology and related disciplines could make to future social capital research and applications.

Keywords: Social capital; Physical environments; Health; Communities; Neighbourhood characteristics

1. Introduction

Social capital has been a topical and diversely applied concept in many journals and disciplines over the last decade, engaging fields as disparate as sociology, health, political sciences, agriculture, economics and education. While academics and researchers continue to debate how to best define and measure social capital, the term is being increasingly branded onto a wide range of policy, social, public health and community agendas and initiatives. It has been harnessed by the rhetoric of governments of various political persuasions and used by both corporate and not-for-profit organisations. Most of these are well intentioned, and reflect a community desire to do something about the erosion of the 'glue' that holds society together.

A recent review by the Australian Productivity Commission for example, recommended that governments sustain functions and roles that support social capital, while modifying policies that erode it and harnessing existing social capital to deliver programs more effectively (Productivity Commission, 2003). National surveys of social capital are being instigated in an increasing number of countries, including Canada (Schellenberg, 2004), UK (National Statistics, 2002), USA (Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, 2000) and Australia (ABS, 2000) on the premise that social capital is a marker of individual and community wellbeing. Social capital has also given rise and form to corporate and not for profit sector initiatives ranging from grass roots community building (Wallis, Crocker, & Schechter, 1998) to urban renewal of disadvantaged areas (Forrest & Kearns, 1999) to preservation of natural environments (Pretty & Ward, 2001).

Despite the expanding myriad of studies contrasting regional, area and neighbourhood differences in social capital, there has been far less progress in disaggregating the specific mechanisms through which social capital and physical environments might relate. Given this, and that much of the academic social capital discourse encompasses the interplay between human interactions and community contexts, it is perhaps surprising that there are limited explicit references to social capital in the environmental psychology literature. For example, social capital very rarely appears as a key word in articles published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology to date. This paper thus explores whether there is a home for social capital among concepts pertinent to the interface between people

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and place, particularly in relation to health, and considers the contribution that environmental psychology and related disciplines could make to social capital discourse in this regard.

2. Origins, definitions and types of social capital

There is no crystallised moment in which the concept of social capital was born, and a consensual definition remains somewhat elusive. As an explicit term, its origins have been traced back as far as the 1920s (Hanifan, 1920), and its application to urban life in the 1960s (Jacobs, 1961). Hanifan described social capital as 'those intangible assets that count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit' (Hanifan, 1920, p. 78).

As an idea and way of thinking, even earlier origins have been mapped, including 19th century sociological discourse (Portes, 1998) and the evolution of Marxist economic theory. Yet earlier still:

> Since the dawn of time, the survival of human beings has depended on the level of their integration into one or more mutually helpful communities. Those with social support and links with others live better than those who remain isolated (Satorius, 2003, p. S105)

Most current definitions of social capital reflect one of three 'schools of thought' that evolved from the sociological and political sciences and are personified by Pierre Bourdeiu (Bourdieu, 1986), James Coleman (Coleman, 1988) and Robert Putnam (Putnam, 1995). Detailed analysis of the evolution, commonalities and differences among the Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam perspectives abound (Harriss & De Renzio, 1997; Moore, Shiell, Hawe, & Haines, 2005; Portes, 2000; Winter, 2000; Woolcock, 1998) and are not duplicated in this paper.

At the simpler end of the definitional spectrum, social capital is often characterised as the glue that holds society together (Altschuler, Somkin, & Adler, 2004; Potapchuk, Crocker, & Schechter, 1997). More explicit definitions reflect many variations on a theme, with networks, norms and trust, and some notion of mutual goals, actions or benefits appearing to be core ingredients. Social capital is not necessarily defined by, or confined to, geographically bordered communities and has been studied in 'communities' as diverse as schools (Strike, 2004), workplaces (Cohen & Prusak, 2001) and chatrooms (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). For the purpose of this paper, Cohen and Prusak's definition represents a reasonable synthesis of theoretical and definitional perspectives, i.e.:

> Social capital consists of the stock of active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible (Cohen & Prusak, 2001, p. 4).

3. Something old or something new?

There is a multiplicity of concepts purporting to measure community social dynamics, but few empirical or theoretical accounts of how these variables differ or relate (Parker et al., 2001). In addition, little work has been done to distinguish social capital from this array of potentially related notions (Lochner, Kawachi, & Kennedy, 1999; Pooley, Cohen, & Pike, 2005). To this end, some query whether social capital is simply a repackaging or rebadging of old concepts (Edwards & Foley, 1997; Rose, 2000), while others maintain that it offers something unique, or at the least, a new perspective (Borthwick, 1999; Carlson & Chamberlain, 2003).

Undeniably, social capital encompasses social processes (such as support and trust) that have long been of interest to both researchers and general humanity. However, it is distinguishable from concepts such as social support that primarily represent an individual level perception and experience (Kawachi, Kim, Coutts, & Subramanian, 2004; McKenzie, Whitley, & Weich, 2002) and is intended to capture something over and above the measurement of individual social connections (Kawachi & Kennedy, 1997). As articulated by Shiell and Hawe (1996), when concerned with social systems such as communities, the whole is not, and differs from, the sum of the individual parts. From an ecological perspective, one of social capital's inherent conceptual values is the fact that it draws attention to the meso-level social structures of families, workplaces and neighbourhoods, which are sometimes lost between individual and broader social systems orientations (Edwards & Foley, 1997).

Social capital also seeks to capture something 'over and above' the attitudes, sentiments and perceptions inherent in concepts such as sense of community, with measures of social capital increasingly including behavioural outworkings of key components such as reciprocity (e.g., number and type of favour exchanges with neighbours) or civic engagement (e.g., participation in voluntary work) over a given time period. 'Networks' in a social capital sense of the word can extend beyond relations and affinities at the individual level (often referred to as bonding social capital) (Harpham, Grant, & Thomas, 2002) to include networks of trust and relationships between people or organisations across power or authority gradients (bridging social capital) (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).

Somewhat paradoxically, the benefits of social capital that exist at a collective community or group level can accrue also to individuals (Walkup, 2003). As illustrated by Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner, and Prothrowstith (1997), a socially reclusive widow may benefit from the caring and watchful eye of residents in the neighbourhood in which she resides. Less hypothetically, the risk of mortality as a consequence of a major Chicago heat-wave was found to correspond strongly to markers of social capital at both the individual and community level (Semenza et al., 1996). The highest risk of death was concentrated among socially