Social Capital and Diversity: An Introduction

By Paula D. McClain

Political-science research on social capital has burgeoned in the past few years.[1] Robert Putnam says that the concept has been invented at least six times during the twentieth century, and its definition has been reconceived. Much current research uses Putnam's definition of social capital—"features of social organizations, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions."[2] Yet political science does not have a corner on the market of research when it comes to studying the concept. Research on social capital has been done—and is being done—in economics, geography, history, demography, sociology, African studies, African American studies, Asian studies, education, ecology, and psychology.[3] In some instances, these disciplines have used the same definition for the term as political science has; in others, that has not been the case. Despite differences in definition, how might other disciplines' research inform our assessment of the effects of social capital? Conversely, what might political science offer to other disciplines to inform their analyses?

In particular, political scientists have characterized social capital as the crowning glory of a liberal society; it is also supposed to be the engine that makes a society democratic as well as liberal. Putnam suggests that America's social capital is declining—as evidenced by a decrease in voter participation, declining membership in groups, declining levels of trust, and neighbors not knowing neighbors. The concern is that declining social capital poses a major threat to the continued maintenance of democracy. Thus, more social capital is good for democracy; less of it may spell trouble.[4]

Does social capital sometimes move our nation farther away from the democratic ideal rather than closer to it?

But is this the whole picture? Is the relationship between social capital and democracy as straightforward as some of the literature indicates? The articles in this symposium show that both the causes and the effects of social capital, especially in the American context, are far more complicated and morally ambiguous than a simple celebration would suggest. Does social capital sometimes move our nation farther away from the democratic ideal rather than closer to it? Provocative question. Difficult question. Critically important question.

The two articles in this symposium were written independently of each other, but both papers—one by economists (Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn), the other by a political scientist (Rodney Hero)—consider questions of heterogeneity or diversity in social-capital research. While neither one denies that social capital is important for democracy and civil society, both show that if you cut into the concept of social capital from a different angle—that of racial and ethnic heterogeneity—suddenly it is no longer the case that all good things come in a bundle. High levels of social capital possibly cause, or possibly affect, or at least are associated with, certain types of inequality. The articles push us to look much more critically at the effect of race and the racial dynamic on the relationship of social capital to democracy and democratic ideals.

Costa and Kahn examine how community heterogeneity negatively influences the *production* of social capital. Their research, along with that of other economists, leads to the conclusion that civic engagement is lower in more heterogeneous communities. They and other economists whose research they review treat race as a community attribute, just like income, education, and poverty levels, and conclude that racial diversity, as a collective attribute, does not bode well for a community's level of civic engagement. The consistency of the negative finding of more heterogeneity with less social capital leads them to ask, "If homogeneity increases civic participation, why are so many in our society pushing for diversity in the workplace and in communities?" But I sense that they are troubled by the implication of their findings—segregation is good for the production of social capital—because they pose another question at the end of the article that seems to plead for additional research: "Can diversity ever increase civic engagement in community organizations that cut across ethnic, racial, or income divisions?"

Hero examines differential racial *outcomes* of social capital on key dimensions of equality. He views race not simply as a community attribute, but as a context within which racial minorities (and majorities) live and interact with American society. He argues that most analyses of social capital do not confront the conditions or contingencies associated with race—understood either as an attribute of individuals or as a context within which all individuals live—and do not recognize that what might be positively related to social capital for whites may in fact be negatively related for blacks.[5] He suggests that the extent to which social capital is associated with better,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592703000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more-equal patterns of civic life, one must ask, "Better for whom?" If I may be so bold as to presume, Hero's response to Costa and Kahn's troubled question (why push for diversity when research shows that it is associated with the lower production of social capital?) might be that in a liberal democratic society, there are values significantly more important, such as racial equality and equality of access. If there is a trade-off, maybe it is worth the price.

Despite their different orientations and conclusions, both papers agree on one thing—more interaction with scholars of social capital from other disciplines or nontraditional perspectives will provide for a richer and more intellectually stimulating take on the effects of social capital. Costa and Kahn begin their article by saying that economists do bowl with political scientists and sociologists on the question of social capital, but they do so in different lanes. Hero perhaps implies that diversity among scholars can provide new analyses of old, presumably settled, questions. As the conclusions of this symposium suggest, in order to develop our research on social capital more fully, perhaps we need to create mixed-discipline teams with varied perspectives, and bowl in the same league.

References

Brehm, John, and Wendy Rahn. 1997. Individual-level evidence for the causes and consequences of social capital. *American Journal of Political Science* 41:3, 999–1,023.

"Civic Participation and American Democracy." 1996. Symposium. *The Public Perspective* 7:4, 1–30.

Putnam, Robert D. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

———. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Touchstone Books.

Notes

1 I must thank Shayla C. Nunnally, doctoral student in political science at Duke University, for introducing me to much of the social-capital literature in political science through the chapters of her dissertation.

2 Putnam 2000, 19; Putnam 1993, 167.

3 A quick search of JSTOR and PsychInfo on the concept—restricted to each discipline's journals—reveals the wealth of research on social capital in articles published since the early 1900s. The earliest appearance of a reference to the concept in a political science journal that I was able to identify was in a 1905 article in *Political Science Quarterly,* "The Field of Economic Dynamics" by John Bates Clark. Clark's definition of social capital, however, was within the context of labor and the accumulation of capital.

4 Others have argued, however, that levels of social capital have remained about the same over time. "Civic Participation and American Democracy" 1996.

5 See also Brehm and Rahn 1997.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592703000070 Published online by Cambridge University Press