Migration Networks and the Concept of Social Capital

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The Concept of Social Capital

During recent years, the concept of social capital has become one of the most popular exports from sociological theory into everyday language. It has been applied to so many events and in so many different contexts as to lose any distinct meaning (Portes 1998). It has had a presence in the discipline of sociology since its very beginning but has been studied under other labels, such as social embedding. It has its roots in the classical nineteenth-century social science of Toqueville, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber (Woolcock 2003). Portes (1998) gives a comprehensive overview of contemporary sources about social capital. Despite some differences, there is a growing consensus in the literature that social capital:

> "… stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures." (Portes 1998: 6)

Recent writings on social capital have extended the concept from an individual asset to a feature of communities and even nations (Putnam 1995; Putnam 2000). Pierre Bourdieu did the first contemporary systematic analysis of social capital. Despite more recent publications on Bourdieu (Harker et al. 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Schwingel 1995), several researchers of social capital have not recognised his work and its empirical applications during the last few decades (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995; Marshall 1998; Dasgupta and Serageldin 2000; Das 2004). According to (Bourdieu 1986: 248-249) social capital is:

> "… the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word."

Social capital is a resource, and is based on a sense of belonging to a group. The total capital which these groups possess serves as a common security and provides a kind of 'credit-worthiness' (Bourdieu 1983: 191). Social capital relations exist only in practice on the basis of material and/or symbolic relations of exchange, which in the same way maintain these social capital relations. They can be equally institutionalised or granted by society. Examples include bearing the same name, showing belongingness to a family, class or ethnic group (Bourdieu 1983: 191) or like in Nepal and India showing with ones own family name belongingness to a caste or clan. Through such an institutionalisation all affected persons are in a way 'informed' about their social capital relationship and it has a forming influence on all effected persons (Bourdieu 1983: 191).

Social capital lies in the structure of people's relationships. To gain and use social capital, a person must be related to others, and these other persons are the actual source of his or her advantage (Portes 1998: 7). The extent of social capital of one's person depends on the extent of social relationships which an individual can mobilise that allows him or her access to resources possessed by their associates and the amount and quality of capitals of these people with whom the individual is in contact (Bourdieu 1983: 191).

Equating social capital with the resources acquired through it can easily lead to tautological statements. Portes (1998: 5) exemplifies:

> "Saying, for example, that student A has social capital because he obtained access to a large tuition loan from his kin and that student B does not because she failed to do so neglects the possibility that B's kin network is equally or more motivated to come to her aid but simply lacks the means to do. Defining social capital as equivalent with the resources thus obtained is tantamount to saying that the successful succeed."

Social networks are neither naturally nor socially – through institutionalisation – given or granted. Networks have to be maintained and institutionalised through multiple forms of interactions between members. An institutionalisation is needed to produce and reproduce useful and lasting relations which provide access to resources. To put it in Bourdieu's terms, a network of social relations is the product of individual and collective investment strategies within certain social fields, which intended or

unintended sustain and create social relations, which promise sooner or later a benefit (Bourdieu 1983: 192). Constant acts of exchanges or of communication which result in a recurring mutual recognition and acknowledgement of relations are necessary. With this recurring acceptance, not only the sense of belonging gets reproduced but also the boundaries of relations to other groups (Bourdieu 1983: 192 -193).
Acquisition of social capital requires deliberate investment of all resources. Though Bourdieu (1983) insists that the outcomes of possession of social or cultural capital are always reducible to economic capital, the processes that bring about these alternative forms are not (also Portes 1998: 4). More or less institutionalised forms of delegation of social capital exist in all groups (Bourdieu 1983: 193). An example is the head of a family, who might represent his or her family in a meeting.
Connections and motivations of people in order to make resources available are not uniform. Therefore Portes (1998) suggest a differentiation between different subcategories of social capital:

- *Value introjections and bounded solidarity*
- *Reciprocity exchange and enforceable trust*

The first, *value introjections,* means internalized norms and values which become appropriable by others or by the collective as a resource. This dates back to Durkheim and a certain interpretation by Weber emphasizing the moral character of economic transactions (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1998). Coleman (1988) refers to it in his analysis as norms and effective sanctions, for example:

> "Norms that make it possible to walk alone at night also constrain the activities of criminals …" (Coleman 1988: 105)

He warns that an excessive emphasis on this process of norm internalization leads to the over-socialised conception of human action in sociology. The example of value introjections shows the close linkage between social capital and habitus, where habitus represents these internalized norms and values.
The second source of social capital is *reciprocity exchanges*. It dates back to Georg Simmel in 1902 (cited in: Portes 1998: 7) and focuses on dynamics of group affiliations and social exchange. Donors provide privileged access to resources in the expectation that they will be fully repaid in the future (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1998).
The third is *bounded solidarity*. It develops when members of a particular group experience situational circumstances that can lead to the emergence of principled group-oriented behaviour and support, quite apart from any early value introjection. The classical source dates back to Marx's analysis of emergent class-consciousness in the industrial proletariat (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1998).
The final source of social capital is *enforceable trust* rooting back to Durkheims theory of social integration and the sanctioning capacity of group rituals:

> "As in the case of reciprocity of exchanges, the motivation of donors of socially mediated gifts is instrumental, but in this case, the expectations of repayment is not based on knowledge of the recipient, but on the insertions of both actors in a common social structure." (Portes 1998: 8)

As a consequence of this structure first the donors' return may come not directly from the recipient but from the collective as a whole in form of status, honour or approval. Second, the collective itself acts, as guarantor that whatever debts are incurred will be repaid. Trust exists in such situations because obligations are enforceable, not through recourse to law or violence but through power of community (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993: 1326; Portes 1998: 8-9).
An often quoted example for social capital are the operation of rotating credit associations (Coleman 1988), where members especially rely on reciprocity exchange and enforceable trust to access financial capital.

> "For example, one could not imagine a rotating-credit association operating successfully in urban areas marked by a high degree of social disorganization–or, in other words, by a lack of social capital." (Coleman 1988: 103)

Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

Poor people, for example, in urban settings frequently depend on close interaction with kin and friends in situations such as job finding. The problem is that ties seldom reach beyond close kin and friends.

They deprive these people of sources of information about employment opportunities elsewhere and ways to attain them as well as access to other infrastructure such as medical care, banks etc. (Portes 1998: 13). In the beginning they can support the individual, but the longer people remain in the city the more difficult it becomes to receive a better-paid job. Regarding livelihood strategies of marginalised people, an important aspect of social capital is the linked opportunity of mobility, namely whether social capital helps ‘to get by’ in surviving or coping or to ‘get ahead’ in enhancing opportunities or upward mobility (de Souza Briggs 2003). These kinds of social mobility are related to the dimensions of *bonding* and *bridging social capital* (World Bank 2001: 128-130; Woolcock 2003). Bonding social capital are ties to people who are similar in terms of their demographic characteristics, such as family members, neighbours, close friends and work colleagues. Bridging social capital describes people who do not share many of the above-described characteristics (Woolcock 2003).

Bonding social capital primarily provides social support such as emotional or physical help in a crisis and helps to uphold identity and status. Bridging capital is primarily instrumental. It generates a more diverse flow of resources for advancing interests and aspirations (Woolcock 2003). In recent years a third classification of *linking social capital* has arisen. It refers to ties to people in positions of authority who provide services in a way, which requires face-to-face contact. It is more vertical, connecting people to key political (and other) resources and economic institutions (World Bank 2001; Woolcock 2003).

This terminology is similar to Granovetter's distinction between ‘strong and weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973). Not closest family and friends (‘strong ties’) but people outside the immediate circle of family and close friends are essential in improving one’s own job position. These outside links are called ‘weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973). This idea is also very close to the traders’ dilemma by Evers (1994). It addresses traders in the process of transformation of an indigenous rural subsistence economy into a cash-crop-producing market economy. On one hand, traders have the moral obligation to share their income with closest kin and neighbours. On the other hand, they have to make profit and accumulate trading capital, which creates a dilemma for them. Being for example beholden to the norms of their village, e.g. practising solidarity, makes it difficult for them to demand repayment of debts or to refuse credit to needy relatives. They have to choose between losing either cash or social esteem (Evers 1994).

Limitations of Possessing Social Capital

If people invest in certain fields to form social capital, it is mostly linked with positive outcomes and their expectations of benefiting in some way. Research into social capital strongly recognises the positive impacts of social capital, but it is important to note the less desirable consequences as well. Portes (1998) summarized four negative consequences of social capital:

- Exclusion of outsiders,
- Excess claims on group members,
- Restrictions on individual freedom, and
- Downward-levelling norms.

Reproduction of social capital creates boundaries (also Bourdieu 1983). The same strong ties that bring benefits to members of a group commonly enable it to bar others from access and exclude outsiders. The second point, excess claims on group members, refers to the observation that group or community closure may under certain circumstances prevent the success of business initiatives by their members. It happens when successful entrepreneurs are constantly assaulted by job and loan-seeking kinsmen and produce a problem of free riding (Geertz 1963; Evers and Schrader 1994; Portes 1998: 16). The third possible negative effect of social capital is that community or group participation leads to demands for conformity; for example, when in a small village all neighbours know each other. The level of social control is strong and can restrict personal freedom (Portes 1998: 16). Against the background of migration, migrants can break and transform traditions if they are far away enough from their home-village, but might be still or again controlled in the migrants’ community. This age-old dilemma between community solidarity and individual freedom was already analyzed by Simmel (1964 [1902]) in his essay ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ (also Portes 1998: 17). The fourth less desirable consequence can be downward-levelling norms. In these situations:

> “… group solidarity is cemented by a common experience of adversity and opposition to mainstream society. (…) individual success stories undermine group cohesion because the later is precisely grounded on the alleged impossibility of such occurrences. The

> result is downward levelling norms that operate to keep members of a downtrodden group in place and force the more ambitious to escape from it." (Portes 1998: 17)

These limitations are closely interrelated with the different subcategories of social capital, such as value introjection, bounded solidarity, reciprocity exchange and enforceable trust.

Critiques of the Concept of Social Capital

Reviewing critically the concept of social capital it is important to distinguish between criticisms of its coherence as a concept, criticisms of its potential normative effects, and criticisms of the types of policy and practice to which it might give rise (Bebbington 2002).

Considering the last point, social capital became increasingly a capital of development as publications by international donors reveal (World Bank 2001). There is a danger of overemphasizing social capital in the community development process. Social capital is even encroached upon and separated from financial, human, natural and other capitals, although they are all very much needed for a sustainable development for people and their communities (Mayer and Rankin 2002; Woolcock 2003; Das 2004). Das (2004) outlines in his case study about poor wage labourers in Orissa, Eastern India, how problematic it can be if social capital is overemphasised. He concludes that norms of sharing are not much use if people have nothing to share. People suffer from insecurity such as not knowing whether they will have a job or food the next day. It undermines the conditions for reproducing norms of reciprocity. Additionally, people lack sufficient purchasing power. It is difficult for them to support or participate in associations and be part of a network of reciprocal help. Also, work-related time constraints and poverty negatively influence civic engagement (Das 2004). This example highlights again the fact that social practice of people has to be analysed in all its complexity.

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