

# Social Capital: The Reality of Imagined Ties in Community Partnership

DAVID VALPEY

San José State University

**ABSTRACT** *Although social capital has been available as a theory to sociologists for some time now, it has not yet found as much popularity in anthropology. Social capital has been explored along three separate tracks, mostly as defined through the works of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam. A unified approach to social capital is important to the application of the theory to real world situations. The concept of social capital has the potential to highlight the importance of membership in social networks: networks not based on traditional economic reciprocity. Social capital is valuable in the evaluation of grass roots organizations because it places value on the relationships that exist between people and/or groups. A group like CommUniverCity San José (CUC) thrives on the value of its social capital. This value is calculated in the trust that is invested in these relationships, not purely on the value of what can be achieved through them. The core group within CUC maintains solid ties with the three major stakeholders in CUC. Their success has been a result of this trust. CUC maintains a core group of at least four people whose connections are so extensive and reliable that most projects they choose to undertake meet with success. [Keywords: social capital, CommUniverCity, community, development] through the primary goal established by the partnership, which is to build social capital and the community's capacity to improve itself? [Keywords: ethnographic evaluation, methods, applied anthropology]*

## INTRODUCTION

CommUniverCity's (CUC) mission statement includes a commitment to enhance social capital in the neighborhoods of Five Wounds and Brookwood Terrace in San José. When they invited us to form a group to evaluate their program, they asked us to look at their use of social capital in their partnerships with the city, university, and local communities. They had had some success building social capital, but were looking for ideas on how to expand its application in their projects. They were also looking for a better understanding of what social capital is and how to increase it.

As we started the project, we made social capital one of the theory sets we would use to guide our analysis of CUC. Doing this, we knew that we would be working with a group of people who already had their own ideas about social capital. CUC has always believed social capital to be vital to its success and several people in the core group were already familiar with the work of Robert Putnam, especially his book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). Putnam's work covers civic engagement and involvement in community organizations, but there is more to social capital. Although they knew his work, the members of CUC were unfamiliar with other works on the topic. This motivated us to research the concept in full and come up with our own understanding. As we continued, this became my area of expertise in the project.

I'll avoid giving a complete summary of all the theories about social capital in this paper, limiting myself to those parts that are important in our evaluation of

CUC. According to John Field (2009), social capital can be summed up in two words: "relationships matter." This brief statement describes what social capital is, but does little to explore some of the implications. Social capital describes the pool of others an individual or group can call on for aid. The connections in this network of social capital can be described using the terms "strong" or "weak" ties. Strong ties describe the connections to family or close friends, and weak ties are all other, less binding ties. Full coverage of the work that has been done is available in several books, but much of the theoretical discussion would not apply to CUC. Before I start, a few comments will be helpful for understanding our approach to evaluating the use of social capital by CUC and its members.

## THEORETICAL WORK

Robert Putnam (1995, 2000) is well known for his claim that social capital is on the decline in the United States. His claim is that civic engagement is on the decline and, as a result, conditions are getting worse in American society. His work has often been used to explain increased crime rates, violence, graffiti, and the disconnection people feel from their communities. According to Putnam, a happy community with a low crime rate is proof of good social capital. For him, social capital exists at the community, city, and national levels. In his work, social capital is food for the community, as people become more involved, the conditions in the community improve. One of the criticisms of his approach is that he does not allow causes other than social capital to account for im-

provement in the community.

Pierre Bourdieu wrote one of the first texts on social capital (Bourdieu 1986). In his text he recognizes three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social. *Economic capital* is the traditional base of a capitalist system. *Cultural capital* can be described briefly as the information needed to know how to act in a culture. *Social capital* is made up of social obligations and is recognizable as membership in a group. The important thing to remember when considering his description is that under certain conditions, each form of capital can be exchanged for other forms of capital. Bourdieu has been criticized for his emphasis on calculating motivations in social capital (Field 2009) but he was clear that while there are advantages to all kinds of capital, such calculations are not necessarily the motivations of the actors. Reciprocity is important to Bourdieu's concept, but he also argues that it is not the necessarily the reason people participate in relationships. Bourdieu focused on social capital as an inheritable capital present mostly in the families of nobility. The advantages gained through membership in a group are also the basis for the solidarity that makes a group possible.

Like Bourdieu, James Coleman looked at social capital in terms of education. Unlike Bourdieu, he argued that the poor could also have substantial amounts of social capital. He expanded the concept beyond a social class and made it available to any population as resource. Coleman also looked at social capital as a form of social control (Field 2009, Coleman 1988). Those who find themselves in relationships they consider important are open to influence through those same relationships. This means that social capital is not only an advantage, but can also influence how people act if they wish to continue to participate in the exchanges that make up their network of social capital resources. A member of a group or network can withhold their participation if others refuse to act in a specific way. Members can be denied access to the privileges of membership, and others can be refused entry into the group.

The final theorist important to our approach to social capital is Mark Granovetter. He said that individuals have a different level of connection to the other people in their lives (Granovetter 1973, 1983). They feel a strong connection, or tie, to their close friends and family. To other people in their network they may have what he called a "weak tie." He argues that strong ties bind a close group of people, but also make it difficult for anyone to leave the group. A weak tie, on the other hand, is easier to break, but it also tends to provide connections between groups. These connections provide the group with outside resources that complement the internal resources of the group. Expanding on Granovetter's work, we might argue that weak ties become an important aspect of networks by adding new pools of potential social

capital.

### COMMUNIVERCITY (CUC)

When we started the project, CUC team members had their own idea of what social capital is and what it does. According to Robby, an AmeriCorps VISTA who worked with CUC for several years, social capital is "the ability and the capacity to build relationships among individuals and among organizations..." (interview, May 22, 2009). He went on to say that it is the "capacity to have established relationships between all sorts of entities." Although CUC claims to identify with the social capital presented by Putnam, this comment shows that their actual concept fits well with a broader understanding of the concept. At the same time, Robby still equates social capital with civic engagement, showing a continued commitment to Putnam's work that would be shared by many of his colleagues.

Certain people in CUC are an ideal focus for considering social capital. The number of connections they have outside the core group, what Granovetter (1973) would call weak ties, make them a sort of natural bridge between groups. I have chosen to highlight one member of CUC, Pasqual, in order to pay more attention to some of the aspects of social capital we found within the organization. (Pasqual is one person, but CUC actually has several people who are as well connected as he is, and they have a similar commitment to the improvement of Five Wounds and Brookwood Terrace.) In our analysis, we found ourselves focusing on Pasqual, who showed up on almost every network map made by the people we interviewed. Then we realized that he has several counterparts in CUC: people we came to refer to as "super-bridgers." Pasqual's story provides an example of how important these super-bridgers are to the success of CUC projects.

Portes and Landolt wrote, "By and large, instances of successful developmental outcomes driven by social capital have been preceded by protracted and unique historical processes requiring an evolution of years or decades" (2000:537). There is probably no single person in CUC who better embodies this description than Pasqual. He has lived around the Five Wounds area and been involved in the Five Wounds Church and the Portuguese community for most of his life. His ties to the community are deep; talking to him about any project involves a discussion of how that topic ties into everything else. He sees himself as the bridge between the city and the community. He describes himself as a type of translator, communicating and representing the community in local government. Officially he works for the Redevelopment Agency of the City of San José; in his mind he works for the communities, finding ways to translate their needs into problems the city can fix. His secondary goal is to empower people to act on their own

behalf. As a part of this, he shares his connections with others as soon as he sees a connection they might find useful. In addition to the city and the community, he has ties to many of the faculty at our university and to many businesses in the area. Going beyond his duties at CUC and his work for the city, Pasqual helps several corporations in the area with their own volunteer activities.

Irene, one of the community organizers, referred to Pasqual as "a big connector, ... he's a resource man" (interview, May 15, 2009). She then went on to describe how he introduced her to many of the people she needed to know to gain support for projects in her own neighborhood action group when she first became active in neighborhood projects. Adam, from Neighborhood Housing Services of Silicon Valley, had this to say: "He's super... I don't know how he does it, he has two kids, he knows everything about every law, and plan, anything..." (interview, June 9, 2009). According to Robby, "Pasqual's kind of all over the place ... [it's] just his way of trying to make sure that he's supporting his staff and the areas he feels responsible and accountable to" (interview, May 29, 2009). Pasqual's Blackberry is essential to his ability to keep in contact with so many people. He owns a custom Blackberry with extra memory that allows him to keep more than the standard 4,000 contacts, and a faster processor to process the extra data.

Good social capital builds up over long periods of time and involves feelings of obligation. A certain reciprocity is required to make it work; people who help you often expect your help in return. This can sometimes lead to what John Field (2009) has referred to as the "dark side" of social capital. Putnam saw only a positive side to social capital, he argued that any social capital is good for the community. That there is a dark side should not be surprising. In a way, it comes as an extension of the expectation for reciprocity and the idea that such reciprocity works to define the limits of a group. Those who are in the group can expect to enjoy the benefits of the group. Because Pasqual has a large network on which he can call, they can and do call on him. The demands on his time are extreme. This is clear when CUC holds its Day of Service event. Pasqual is known to stay awake the entire week before the event, but any time of year people call him constantly asking for help.

The Day of Service is an annual event, and by far the largest event sponsored by CUC. It is their most visible event and draws support from the community, the city, and the university. Pasqual's efforts are indispensable to its success. Without his efforts and his ability to bring together all of the people involved many feel that the day would not be possible. Without the social capital of CUC built through interactions throughout the rest of the year, it would be impossible to hold such an event. We chose to focus on the Day of Service as an example of the enormous potential the exercise of social capital

has to motivate action in others. Participating in the event, we experienced first hand the ability of CUC to make positive use of social capital.

Every year, CUC sponsors the Day of Service near the end of SJSU's spring semester. During the time we spent observing CUC, we found that there are two modes of operation. This leads to the impression that there are, in essence, two very different programs running under one name. This is a day on which volunteers from all the different stakeholders get together to complete a large number of jobs around the city. Some people it as the culmination of all the work that CUC does throughout the year. It is a very public event that brings a lot of attention to CUC and the many partner programs involved. Every stakeholder involved in the event benefits from the attention devoted to this day. They are able to present the results of the day, in very clear numbers, to the city government, justifying the work and funds the City of San José has invested in CUC projects over the year. The various partner organizations get public recognition of their support for community improvement. The residents in the neighborhoods affected see impressive results in a matter of hours on projects that otherwise might have taken weeks. Many of the jobs done by volunteers, such as house painting, would not have been city projects. Others, such as cleaning and painting of public areas, may otherwise have had to wait a long time as budget considerations limit the number jobs the city government can accomplish at one time across the whole city. This takes pressure off of city resources while improving the quality of life in the neighborhoods.

Although it has not led to serious conflict within the group, some people question the effectiveness of the Day of Service. Those who are less impressed by the results of the event worry that it is motivated by a desire for publicity rather than a desire to help the communities. Their concern is not that the day has a negative effect, rather they feel that it does not fit with the mission statement or stated goals of CUC. Since building social capital is in the mission statement, this becomes a part of the concern about the Day of Service. The planning for the day involves a massive exercise of social capital. Connections that have been built over time are drawn in to provide what they can for the day, and in some ways it works to solidify relationships that have been built over time. It does not serve to build networks between volunteers and the community in the same way that other CUC events do. The volunteers spend at most half a day in the community before they leave again. Many of the volunteers are people otherwise are not involved with CUC and who do not remain involved after the Day of Service. For example, fraternities and sororities associated with the university are required to perform a certain number of hours of community service each year. They complete many of these hours at the Day of Service, but do not

remain involved in the communities once they are finished on that day.

Given the various ways in which the theories of social capital can be applied, both points of view are valid. The Day of Service event does not seem to build lasting connections between the volunteers and the communities. The project I worked on as part of our observation of CUC was the cleanup of an area under a freeway interchange; we had only minimal contact with the community. We saw a few community members and a couple of them spoke at the end to thank us for the work we had done. The relatively short amount of time and large number of volunteers worked to anonymize most of us in the eyes of the community. This, however, does not mean that no positive effect was seen in other relationships.

The students who participated in the Day of Service worked together with friends, with other students from their classes, and met new people, connecting with people they might not have otherwise. Among the student body, the event raises awareness of CUC events, and what CUC does in the communities. Many of the students may never participate in another event, large or small, but some will. The Day of Service is still an important event. It improves the credibility of CUC within the community. On this day, more than any other, residents can see the enormous power of CUC to get things done. The results, in terms of numbers and publicity, help to reinforce faith in CUC as a program worthy of attention. These all improve the social capital of the stakeholders.

What the Day of Service shows us is the enormous power of social capital to effect change. The power of social capital is generally described in terms of the potential of social networks or connections. The Day of Service shows the power that can be moved into action when a huge number of these connections are activated at the same time. This is the point at which the network itself becomes a force for change. All of the potential is invested in one personality, or an organization such as CUC, with an effect that is much like that of the power of a corporation when it represents all of its stakeholders. As a group, stakeholders are able to accomplish much more than they would alone. In the weeks leading up to the Day of Service, CUC acts as the board of this corporation based mostly on social capital, enhancing the power of each stakeholder to work on the improvement of the community. Many of these stakeholders may not have a direct interest in the neighborhoods, but by virtue of their participation in the network they become agents for change. This corporate expression of various networks involved is organic, groups join in or drop out all the time. Each year sees more participants getting involved.

## CONCLUSION

I have termed the various partners as stakeholders because they have an interest in the success of the event. But their commitment to this success is not found in contracts; they have made no official commitment to the project. Their commitment is based on the reciprocity of a social contract. This is based on a continuing relationship with CUC. The commitment to work with CUC is based on a trust that has built up over time. Social capital does not accrue through one or two interactions, but through many over a period of time that can span years. It is the perceived commitment, which is also a very real commitment, on the part of CUC members to the success of the event that makes all this possible.

Social networks, the very real basis for social capital, are based on relationships with others. These relationships are the result of interactions over long periods of time and the mutual commitments that form over that time. Pasqual, more than any other person, is known for having built up a wide network of these kinds of connections. In a sense, these commitments are imagined, they are not present in physical form. These commitments, and the social capital they help build, find real expression through CUC activities in the communities. The ultimate instance of these activities can be seen in the Day of Service itself and the motivation of so many actors over a short period of time.

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