The big world experiment: the mobilization of social capital in migrant communities
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Conclusion

At the end of this book I want to address a number of general issues regarding suggestions for further research, the implications of this work for the theory of social capital and political participation, and the individual-collective outlook on social capital. But first I want to emphasize, once more, the unique selling point of the current study, namely the Big World Experiment. I also want to make a plea for the greater use of experimental research methods and demonstrate that experiments, and in particular the BWE, are closer to reality than is often thought to be the case.

The importance of doing experimental research

Research in the social sciences is generally of a ‘static’ nature: whatever the phenomenon under study, researchers usually rely on data that provides a picture of a given moment in time, with fixed indicators. This is not particularly troublesome in work that has no other objective than mapping a status quo, but if a study concerns a process, mechanism or causal relationship, this is problematic. Too often correlations are presented as causalities without empirical support. An important cause of this improper use of data is that current research methods in the social sciences do not offer any other options. As long as researchers rely predominantly on large databases or interview data, they can, at most, suggest that a causal relationship is plausible, but they cannot demonstrate it. This kind of data does not provide insight into the actual processes or mechanisms of interest and, in so far as interviewees discuss these processes, the validity of their retrospective information remains questionable. Participant observation provides some solace, but its major disadvantages are that it is time-consuming, the researcher’s interference disturbs the ‘true’ process while his/her observations are, by definition, subjective, and it is usually restricted to only a few case studies.

This problem of a lack of insight into presumed causality also applies to research on social capital. Social capital is generally studied by means of static facts, such as the number of organizations, levels of generalized trust, the size of the circle of acquaintances etc. These facts, combined with a generous dose of assumptions, should provide insight into the process that takes place between social capital and whatever it is supposed to influence. But these processes, the way in which social capital works, and what social capital looks like in operation, is rarely, if ever, the object of study. Obviously, in many cases it is difficult to keep track of these processes, particularly in studies on the
collective level, or in large-scale research. But in this study I have shown that it is not impossible; indeed, on the contrary. The Big World Experiment does provide an insider’s view of social capital in operation.

Experimentation is not an everyday method in the behavioral and social sciences; certainly not outside the domain of psychology. In that field, experiments are very common and lead to valuable insights that are also applicable outside the laboratory and in the real world. In the rest of the social sciences, however, the idea seems to prevail that what happens outside the ‘natural setting’, or after a researcher’s intervention, does not say anything about ‘true’ processes in the real world (cf. Babbie, 1975(in Mook); Mook, 1983; Levitt & List, 2007; Benz & Meier, 2008; Falk & Heckman, 2009). However, it is a misconception that experimentation implies an unnatural elicitation of behavior in the sterile environment of a laboratory (even though this kind of experimentation can also yield valuable insights, for example, into the political behavior of citizens). Researchers could also develop field experiments with which to study subjects in their natural environment, while manipulating the relevant variables. I believe that my Big World Experiment is a good example of how experimentation is indeed of value in the social sciences. This approach yielded results that are worthwhile in themselves, and are important supplements to the interview data. Most of all, with the straightforward design of the Big World Experiment, I have been able to shine a light on the working of social capital, which other research has not been able to do. I would, therefore, recommend that other researchers should start considering how experiments can increase their insight into processes that may otherwise remain obscure. Fortunately, it is ever more recognized that experimentation within political science is a fruitful endeavor. This will be even more the case when increased numbers of researchers come to realize that experimental articles are cited with greater frequency than other contemporaneous pieces (Druckman, Green, Kuklinski, & Lupia, 2006).

Real life Big World ‘Experiments’

In addition to my plea for more experiments, and in order to demonstrate that field experiments need not be remote from reality, I would also like to elaborate on the relevance of the BWE in relation to naturally elapsing mobilizations. Of course, the nature of an experiment is that the researcher is in charge of the relevant variables, which, in the case of the BWE, meant that I was the one who actually started a mobilization after determining the topic upon which I would mobilize which subjects. In that sense, any experiment is merely an attempt to approximate real life processes, and the limited data obtained serve as a model for what happens in the grander scheme of things. The aim of my BWE was to demonstrate how social capital, expressed as organizational networks, is used. To this end, I focused on the Turkish communities in
two cities, which had the advantages that they are of a manageable size and I already had considerable information about the shapes of their networks. This enabled me to properly record what happened during the mobilization and, thus, interpret how the networks function. Furthermore, the results of the BWE as applied herein can serve as a model for processes that take place naturally. In everyday life there are ‘starters’ that try to reach a large audience and mobilize as many people as possible. The mobilization of the Turkish communities is an example of how the nature of the community, the environment in which it operates, and the value of the information determine the course of the mobilization. These insights can be extrapolated for wider contexts.

For example, in January of 2009, the Israeli army invaded the Gaza strip. This upset many Muslims around the world who sympathized with the Palestinians who were under fire. Who the ‘starters’ were, nobody knows, but it is a fact that a text message and an e-mail were circulated in Muslim communities in the Netherlands. This stated that two German low budget supermarket chains (Aldi and Lidl), which are often used by many less well-off migrants, were supportive of Israel and intended to donate all of their profits on a particular Saturday to the country. The receiver of the message was urged to forward it to as many other people as possible and boycott the supermarket on the indicated date. It even made it to the papers (Groen & Kranenberg, 2009). The supermarkets have not yet reported, however, whether they actually had fewer customers that day.

Another example regards the protests in Iran after the elections in 2009, where hundreds of people demonstrated against the allegedly fraudulent elections and in favor of the opposition. The protests did not seem to have been formally organized (Al Jazeera, 2009, June 14); the protesters were mobilized through the micro-blogging service Twitter123 and word of mouth (Erdbrink, 2009). The fact that Twitter played a role in the mobilization has received much attention, since it was used to inform Iranians and, indeed, people all over the world about what was happening in Iran, while the Internet and other modern channels of communication were cut off. Twitterers posted messages about where and when demonstrations were taking place and what went on during those protests. This information was picked up and subsequently spread amongst the protesters. The twitterers can thus be regarded as the starters of the mobilization. Some went even further than this. Around that time, an e-mail was circulated in which the sender insinuated that the riots in Iran were not initiated by the Iranian people, but rather that the Israeli intelligence services had stirred them up. He wrote:

“...what about the so-called Twitter-protests? Are @StopAhmadi, @IranRiggedElec and @Change_For_Iran, the twitterers who were the first to post tens of thousands of messages, truly Iranian citizens who are fighting against

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123 Twitter.com is a website on which subscribers can leave short messages of 140 signs, known as ‘tweets’. People who leave their message are called ‘twitterers’.
injustice and illegitimate elections, or are these undercover actions by the Israeli intelligence and press agencies?’

In other words, the writer of the e-mail is suggesting that the Israeli intelligence services have acted in the role that I, the researcher, took in my Big World Experiment, namely that of an intervening outsider who artificially initiated a mobilization. Although it remains to be seen where the truth lies in this conspiracy theory, the underlying idea does provide food for thought.

Both examples demonstrate that a small piece of information that is referred to at the right places can spread quickly amongst large groups of people and lead to the mobilization of many of them. This, of course, depends on the type of information (the more urgent, the greater the effect), the nature of the community (how are the members connected), and the context (for example, the political opportunity structure). The current study has provided some insight into this which can serve as a guideline for the interpretation of real life events. For example, it became clear that sometimes only a small number of actors are crucial for the mobilization of a community, as exemplified by the position of the umbrella organizations in the Turkish community in Berlin and the fact that they were repeatedly addressed during the mobilization. Something similar was seen during the intended supermarket boycott: it was reported that some people received the same message more than ten times. It would, therefore, be interesting to discover what the roles of these individuals in the community are, and what distinguishes them from the people who did not receive the message.

It is interesting to see how modern technology was used in both examples of the ‘natural’ mobilization processes referred to above; e-mail, SMS, mobile telephony and the Internet played key roles. These means of communication not only facilitate community mobilizations, but also provide new opportunities to researchers. The ease and speed with which electronic messages are spread, as well as the fact that they are easily tracked and traced, facilitate studies of mobilization on a larger scale than was conducted here. What we need now is for someone to take on this challenge and open up this treasure chest of information.

**Variations of the BWE: suggestions for future studies**

Even though I am convinced of the additional value of alternative research methods, and experimentation in particular, I acknowledge that these also have their limitations, and that includes the Big World Experiment. In Chapter 7, I have already addressed the possible incorporated biases, so here I want to consider some elements of the experiment that are open to change and can serve as the basis for further research.

First of all, the type of mobilization may have determined the course thereof. In this study, the communities were triggered to perform a mobilization in the shape of
information dissemination (i.e. sending a piece of information) on a specific topic. Variation in the topic may, however, bring to light a difference in the course of the mobilization. If the invitation to a lecture, which was the topic herein, was replaced by information about a recently implemented subsidy policy, or the damaged reputation of one of the organizations, the participants may have addressed other actors. On the other hand, I would not expect to find very different mobilization networks in these cases, because the one that was produced as a result of my invitation to a lecture, which is a neutral piece of information, was already characterized by bonding ties. More sensitive information, however, such as that about financial issues, would lead to the actors limiting themselves to their closest contacts even more.

Instead of altering the type of information to be passed on, one could replace the information dissemination altogether with a resource, political, or economic example to see the effects that other types of mobilization have on the course thereof (also see Chapter 7 for a discussion of the different kinds). These types of mobilization are, however, much more laborious, and it would take a considerable effort to perform a controlled experiment to highlight them. Moreover, the ethics of these experiments should be carefully considered since such concerns may easily become an issue when actors are encouraged to act upon a non-existent incident. For that matter, it is perhaps more convenient to wait and break into a spontaneous mobilization, although this puts the researcher in an undesirably uncertain and dependent position. Nevertheless, any adjusted replication studies would be valuable additions to the current Big World Experiment.

A possible BWE relating to the political mobilization of associations involves a petition on a political theme which needs to be signed by as many organizations as possible and then delivered to the minister responsible; an example is the issue of dual citizenship. This would not only reveal how a community mobilizes itself, but would also demonstrate how it overcomes the gap between citizens and authorities. As this topic is relatively politically neutral (that is, I spoke to both left and right wing organizational leaders who were of the opinion that dual citizenship should be allowed), the whole community can potentially be included in the mobilization. More controversial topics may be used to monitor how sympathizers of different political ideologies deal with these appeals to mobilize and how this differs to what happens with a neutral trigger. I would expect that a neutral political topic, which is nevertheless relevant to all members of the migrant community, will cause organizations to address bridging as well as bonding ties, and indeed probably more bridging ties than was the case in the current study. This is because I believe that a topic which concerns the lives of the individual members of the community, who are also the people who make up the organizations, would lead the organizational leaders to ignore ideological differences. Whether this is a correct assumption is something that only further research can discover.

A second point of attention for future research is the status of the group in which the working of social capital is tested. Ethnic communities obviously have a different ethnic
background to the majority in the host society. It is possible that there is a significant awareness within the migrant group of this divergence, and that people think in terms of ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’. This awareness may influence the structure of the community’s social capital, and, more importantly, it may also affect the way in which it is used. It could lead to a more inward-looking orientation, as the Turkish communities studied herein displayed, but this need not be the case. A comparison of the results of BWEs performed within other migrant groups in the same city would shed light on this, and a comparison with non-migrant groups would, perhaps, do this even more.

Related to this is the question of whether there is a ‘typically Turkish’ way of using social capital. The current research focused on the Turkish communities in Amsterdam and Berlin, which are extraordinary groups in many ways. They are characterized by ideological differences because these were transferred from Turkey. The homeland, the memory of it, and the process of socialization that immigrants experienced there may have an impact on how Turkish migrants operate in their new place of residence. The cultural baggage that migrants possess may also involve certain expectations of the government and each other, which influence the use of social capital. Perhaps the way the Turkish communities interact with, or respond to, a political opportunity structure is not only affected by the POS itself; it may also be influenced by the way in which they are used to responding to the political opportunity structure in their home country. An investigation of the interaction of organizations in Turkey with each other and the local government could provide insight into whether there is a ‘typically Turkish’ way of using social capital. It remains to be seen, however, whether the Turkish factor has an effect on the mobilization process in addition to or apart from the strong influence of the POS. The ways in which the social capital of the Turkish communities in Amsterdam and Berlin is both shaped and used diverge to such an extent that the additional explanatory value of this cultural factor would be valuable.

Finally, an interesting replication of this study could take place in the somewhat distant future, for example in one or two decades. Longitudinal network analyses have shown that networks (including those of ethnic organizations) are changeable; their structure varies over time. Moreover, apart from the general changes that networks experience over the years, in the particular case of migrant organizations these changes also involve a generational aspect. Some of the younger respondents in Amsterdam have already declared that the ideological divisions that characterize the Turkish community are ‘old-fashioned’, but these divides are currently still prominent in both Amsterdam and Berlin. The question is whether the organizational elite of the future will, in fact, disregard the ideological and perhaps even the ethnic characteristics of organizations. If the younger respondents are true to their word, a future replication will display a mobilization network in which the ideological groups are not as easily distinguished as was the case herein.
Implications for the theory of the relationship between social capital and political participation

This study was not performed just to prove the utility of experimental methods, but aimed to test some of the assumptions posed in social capital theory about the political participation of migrant groups, or, as I phrased it in the introduction, to open up the black box. This theory states that the groups that possess social capital in the form of interconnected voluntary organizations also demonstrate greater degrees of political participation. The explanation of this relationship is that the (interlocked) board members develop and exchange information, as well as social and political trust, which they pass on to their members, who, in turn, pass it on to non-members. The whole community, thus, becomes more aware of the necessity of political participation. Furthermore, interlocks between organizations have a multiplying effect on the civic learning processes that are supposed to take place in voluntary associations (the ‘schools of democracy’). The three general processes that are incorporated in this theory are the process of the transfer of information and trust: (1) between board members from different organizations, (2) from board members to members within an organization, and (3) from members to non-members. This study aimed to provide insight into the first process, because I wanted to start at the beginning: if the first steps in the mechanism do not elapse as expected, this could have consequences for studies about the later steps. (For that matter, experimental research methods are particularly suitable for testing the processes of information and trust transfer from board members to members and from members to non-members. Future research should certainly focus on these latter aspects.) This study has shown that the assumptions that are made regarding this first process are not completely justified.

The theory presupposes that the interlocking directorates function as channels of communication. Therefore, one would expect that the relationships in the network of interlocking directorates in particular are addressed during the mobilization. This study has demonstrated that this is not the case, at least not for the day-to-day mobilization that was tested here. However, what did become clear is that the connections that are addressed in the mobilization are of the same type as the connections in the network of interlocking directorates, namely they are both characterized by a bonding nature and, thus, a high degree of trust. As a rule, organizations have shared board members if they trust each other, and they usually trust those organizations that are similar to them. Moreover, in Amsterdam, the interlocks between associations were the reflection of a foundation strategy: new organizations were founded with board members who were already involved in existing, affiliated organizations. The interlocking directorates in Berlin (which were less numerous than in Amsterdam) were only found between organizations of similar ideological backgrounds. In other words: interlocks reflect significant mutual trust. The mobilization networks mainly contained bonding
relationships, as seen from the fact that the organizations mobilized alters that were ethnically or ideologically the same, or were even personal connections. Most organizations possessed a vast range of acquainted counterparts (as could be seen in the contact networks), but only those that they felt really affiliated to were eventually mobilized. These results suggest that for organizations to intensively communicate or mobilize the community, it is not necessary to share a board member, but it is necessary to trust each other. In other words, the assumption that the interlocking directorates serve as channels of information is refuted in the context of this BWE, but there certainly is communication at the board level between organizational leaders. However, close contact between associations in everyday life 'override' the close relationships on the formal level.

The refuting of this primary assumption does not imply that the theory of the relationship between social capital and the political participation of migrant communities as a whole may as well be dismissed. We should not throw away the baby with the bathwater. If the social capital of organizations is interpreted in the broader sense, i.e. as a combination of formal and informal connections, the theory does hold true, at least in so far as the assumption about the communication between organizations is concerned. A small part of the 'black box' has, thus, been revealed. The tenability of the other assumptions, however, is still to be proven.

In addition, the role of the network of interlocking directorates should not be dismissed too easily, even though this might be the obvious response given the fact that in neither city the actors addressed this network (save for one organization in Amsterdam). The results presented here stem from a special kind of mobilization that was performed within the scope of a specific experiment. The fact that I instigated the whole mobilization and not a fellow-organization with a lot of money, a distinct point of view on a political topic, or in acute need of help, probably affected the degree to which the participants perceived the mobilization as urgent. I assumed that the invitation to my lecture was a neutral piece of information, but it may have been a provocation to groups that are suspicious of research of any kind and that distrust the university, or, on the contrary, organizations may have considered the invitation trivial. Both groups may have reacted by withdrawing themselves from the mobilization or by addressing other contacts than they would have otherwise. Possibly, in less threatening, more relevant, or more urgent appeals for mobilization, organizations use their connections from the network of interlocking directorates much more than they did during this BWE. Before these alternatives are put to the test, it cannot be ruled out that the contact network and the network of interlocking directorates are called upon in different situations, and the role of the latter network, therefore, cannot be dismissed.

The leading questions in this study concerned the relationship between social capital and its mobilization, as well as the influence of the political opportunity structure on both. With regard to the mobilization networks, it became clear that they differed
significantly from city to city. Amsterdam’s had a fragmented structure of bonding ties, while in Berlin, similar bonding ties and clusters were found, but the crucial difference was that in this mobilization network, a few crucial weak links bound these separate groups together. The answer to the question of why two Turkish communities, which have practically the same demographic characteristics and similar migratory backgrounds, nevertheless, act differently during a mobilization, can primarily be found in the relevant political opportunity structures (POS) in the two cities. Moreover, these differ considerably to each other; Amsterdam has a relatively open POS when compared to the closed system in Berlin.

The influence of the political opportunity structure on a community’s social capital and the mobilization thereof is reflected in the relationships between associations and the authorities. Based on the social capital, and in particular the contact networks, it is my view that there are no major differences between the Turkish communities in the two cities, since both contain about the same number of governmental actors. But, if push comes to shove, i.e. when the communities are triggered to mobilize themselves, the relationships between Turkish civil society and the authorities vary a great deal. In Amsterdam, several governmental actors were included in the mobilization, while none were addressed in Berlin. This demonstrates that the relationships in the former city are much more positive than in the latter location. Furthermore, other research has shown that the Turks in Amsterdam have higher levels of political trust than those in Berlin (Berger, 2010). Accordingly, it follows that the positive attitudes towards the authorities in the former community, and the not so positive attitudes in the latter, can be explained by the approaches that the respective authorities adopted towards these communities. The political opportunity structure in Amsterdam has always been encouraging when it comes to ethnic organizations, which explains the positive relationships here: you do not bite the hand that feeds you. However, the closed political opportunity structure in Berlin has resulted in less positive relationships between organizations and authorities. Turkish associations did not expect much from the local government and, therefore, refrained from having trusting relationships with it.

Yet, the relationships between Turkish civil society and their respective governments also had consequences for the internal relationships within the communities. The lack of encouragement from and positive relationships with the government in Berlin is compensated for by more abundant links between associations and, strikingly, also between ideological groups. This can be deduced from the fact that the mobilization network in this city was much better connected than the one in Amsterdam. To jointly oppose a government that has pursued an exclusionary policy, the associations were compelled to join forces. Through collaboration, they are able to resolve the problems that each of them is facing, which they cannot manage to do on their own. As a prerequisite for opposing groups deciding to work together, they have to learn to overcome ideological differences. As they are doing so, they develop inter-organizational trust, as is predicted in the theory of voluntary organizations as schools
of democracy. In short, the Turkish organizations in Berlin are more trusting simply because they have had to struggle more in an inimical environment. The situation in Amsterdam, on the other hand, is one in which the positive relationships between organizations and the authorities have reduced the need for trusting relationships to develop between opposing Turkish groups. The support of the government allows the community to maintain internal differences.

In theory, both social and political trust need to prevail amongst organizational leaders in order to be passed on to the members of their associations and make them more (politically) active. However, this contradicts the empirical data presented here and in Berger’s work. The seeming contradiction of high social and low political trust (or vice versa), in combination with the level of political activity of the community, can thereby be elucidated. Organizations may not display a greater degree of political trust, but the abundant activities they perform as a reaction to their restrictive environment can be an example to their members and, through them, to non-members alike. The grassroots will, therefore, gain a better sense of the need for and the use of political participation.

Here, I inferred the levels of inter-organizational trust from the way in which the mobilization networks are shaped. I took the presence of bonding and bridging ties as indicators of higher (bonding) or lower (bridging) trust. In order to substantiate the assumption proposed here, it would, however, be worthwhile studying the levels of trust within the communities more directly. Again, this is a suggestion for further research.

On the outlooks on social capital: I network, therefore...

In closing, I want to comment on the theoretical conceptions of social capital and the typology of views about the issue that I have presented in the theoretical part of this book. Combining what I called the providing and receiving sides of social capital on the individual or collective level, I distinguished four outlooks which each represent a combination of the two sides. The reason why I introduced this typology was with the aim of shedding some light on the overwhelming amount of literature that has been written on this topic and in which social capital is approached from apparently contradictory angles. At the end of this book, therefore, I want to discuss whether my classification and, in particular, the outlook that I took as the guiding principle, served their purpose.

The approach to social capital that I have used is the one in which the providing side is on the individual level, while the receiving side is on the collective level. In other words, with this view of social capital it is a collective, here a Turkish community, which benefits from the social capital of the actors that make up this collective, in this case, voluntary associations. The main reason why I adopted this outlook was that I wanted to
demonstrate how the social capital of a community of organizations operates during a mobilization. I reasoned that a community mobilization depends on the individual choices that associations make with regard to which counterparts they would address. In other words, the mobilization, which I regarded as the beneficial outcome, depended on how the individual actors broke into their individual social capital.

Choosing this individual-collective perspective was not the most obvious step because, to my knowledge, there is no previous work that also fits into this category. Initially, the support I had for my decision to pursue this line of research was limited to random examples and a growing sense that what I wanted to demonstrate about social capital could best be captured in this way. However, I believe that this study does provide the empirical evidence for this approach. Individual choices about addressing leading organizations, collaborative bodies, or even personal acquaintances were a major influence on the mobilization process, highlighting that the network (use) of a single organization can have major advantages for the community that it is a part of. At the same time, when taking stock of the aggregated data, the communities in the two cities exhibited clearly different patterns. The individual-collective approach allowed me to switch between these two levels of analysis more than any of the other three outlooks would have done.

I started this book with the phrase ‘I network, therefore I am’, as a motto about modern online life. In view of the typology introduced in this book, this remark summarizes an individualistic outlook on social capital. This study has shown that in the offline real world, the actions of one actor can have an impact on the existence and well-being of the collective. In other words, one might as well say: “I network, therefore we are.”