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

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Summary (English)

Migrant organizations can play an important role in the process of integration; through the social capital that they have at their disposal, these organizations contribute to the social capital of the members of their communities. The aim of the current study was to investigate what this social capital of organizations is comprised of and how it is used. To this end, the Big World Experiment was developed. In addition, the influence of the political opportunity structure on (the mobilization of) social capital was analyzed.

1. The theory

Just as people have financial capital, they also possess social capital. Lin (2001) defines this as ‘the access to and use of resources embedded in a social structure’. While financial capital enables you to buy a car, social capital improves your chances of achieving the goals that would otherwise have been beyond your reach. It refers to your friends and acquaintances and the commodities and services that they put at your disposal, for example whether they are willing to walk your dog, help you find a better job, or lend you money. Scholars generally distinguish three aspects of social capital: networks, trust, and shared norms and values (cf. Van Deth, 2003), although not everyone emphasizes each element in the same way. In the current study, I focused primarily on the network component, because an actor can only access the resources of others if he/she is actually connected to them. This component is, therefore, a necessary prerequisite for the presence of social capital. What is more, in most cases the mere presence of a connection between two actors means that they trust each other and share the same norms and values.

Social capital can involve more than a single individual, as well as actors that are not people. Putnam (1995), for example, argues that the quality of democracy is positively related to the amount of social capital that exists in society. His measure of social capital is the degree of generalized social trust in this society (i.e. whether someone has faith in those he/she does not know personally). Accordingly, Putnam studies social capital on the collective or group level. It is important to distinguish clearly between individual and collective social capital. This is because researchers tend to consider different perspectives without making this explicit, using measurement instruments which fit their view of social capital but would not match any other approach to this issue. When this occurs, it can appear that these scholars are concerned with completely different matters, when in fact they are talking about the same thing, but on a different level. In order to make the differences clearer, I have used a typology in which I distinguish between an individual and collective ‘provider’ and an individual and collective ‘receiver’ of social capital. The ‘provider’ refers to who or what is the source of the social
capital, whereas the ‘receiver’ is the actor or set of actors who can benefit from it. In Putnam’s case, both the provider and the receiver operate on the collective level. Lin, on the other hand, studies the two sides of social capital from the individual perspective. In Coleman’s (1990) theory, however, the provider is on the collective and the receiver is on the individual level. In the current study, I used a fourth perspective, which regards the provider as operating on the individual and the receiver on the collective level. This approach is particularly useful in this study because I wanted to investigate how voluntary organizations within ethnic communities (migrant organizations) use their social capital. An organization (the provider) is regarded as an ‘individual’ or separate actor. If each organization activates its social capital, for example by gathering and passing on information, all of the organizations taken together would be able to inform all of the members of their community. Accordingly, the community (the collective) is regarded as the receiver of social capital.

Immigration and integration are hotly debated topics in Western liberal democracies. Many of these discussions concern the importance of migrant organizations, with some arguing that they hinder the (political) integration of immigrants into the host society, while others maintain that they actually promote it.

According to Almond and Verba (1962), voluntary organizations generally have a stimulating effect on the political attitudes of citizens. They argue that different kinds of people, with opposing views, meet within these organizations and, to make a success of the organization and work towards common goals, have to find ways of overcoming their internal differences. In the process of doing this, they learn democratic skills, such as debating, democratic values, like mutual equality, and also develop social trust. The members then transfer these skills and attitudes into the ‘real world’, where they are more likely to participate in the political process.

Almond and Verba did not study migrant organizations in particular, but the question arises: why would something which holds true for voluntary organizations in general, not also apply to migrant organizations? Fennema and Tillie (1999) revealed that in the case of Amsterdam, the members of ethnic communities which are more organized have higher rates of political participation than those in communities that are less well organized. In other words, the researchers were able to confirm Almond and Verba’s proposition in the particular case of migrant organizations. Fennema and Tillie added that not only does the number of organizations within a community matter, but whether these organizations are connected at board level by means of interlocking directorates is just as relevant. An interlocking directorate refers to an individual who has seats on the boards of two or more organizations at the same time. Fennema and Tillie assumed that these interlocking directorates speed up the process of learning ‘lessons in democracy’, because the board members of the separate organizations work together and exchange information. Because of these contacts, and the interaction with governmental bodies, the board members also develop social and political trust. They
then pass this on to their members, who in turn pass it on to friends and acquaintances who do not belong to any organization.

Even though this is a convincing line of argument, empirical support for it is limited. The few indicators presented by Fennema and Tillie of the degree of organization on the one hand and the extent of political participation on the other, provide no insight into the processes of information exchange and the passing on of trust. In the current study, I developed a tool named the Big World Experiment with which it is possible to track the exchange of information between organizations, a process which is regarded as one type of mobilization of the social capital of migrant organizations. The research questions which guided the investigation of the organizational network and the mobilization thereof were:

- What does the social capital of an ethnic community look like?

- How is this social capital mobilized?

The way in which organizations mobilize their social capital not only depends on the way it is shaped, but also on the context in which these organizations operate. The relevant contact for migrant organizations is the political opportunity structure. This refers to ‘dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action’ (Tarrow, 1994). In the specific case of immigrants, Koopmans and Statham (2000) distinguished two dimensions which determine the political opportunity structure (POS): citizenship regimes and integration policies. The first dimension refers to the individual rights of immigrants, such as the right to be naturalized and vote. The second dimension concerns immigrants’ rights as a group, for example the right to establish ethnic organizations. A POS is ‘closed’ if immigrants have few individual and group rights, and ‘open’ when they have more. It is generally acknowledged that the openness of the political structure influences the degree to which people take collective action (e.g. Tilly, 1978). It is likely that this openness also influences the way in which collective action is taken. Consequently, it was expected herein that the political opportunity structure would have an effect on the way in which migrant organizations mobilized their social capital. A third research question was therefore:

- What is the influence of the political opportunity structure on the social capital of migrant organizations and the way in which they mobilize it?

This was studied by means of a comparison between two cities, one which has an open POS, i.e. Amsterdam, while that of the other is relatively closed, i.e. Berlin. The characteristics of the open POS in Amsterdam include the facts that: migrants who have lived in the city for at least five years have the right to vote in local elections; many migrant organizations receive grants; and the government has actively pursued policies...
relating to integration. The POS in Berlin, however, is regarded as closed because: immigrants cannot easily become naturalized; have no voting rights; very few organizations receive subsidies; and integration has only recently become a separate policy field.

Both cities harbour a Turkish community of a considerable size, each of which is well organized and similar with respect to social demographic characteristics. These comparable communities, in different circumstances, therefore lend themselves to an assessment in which the influence of the POS can be evaluated.

2. The methods

In order to answer the research questions set out above, several types of data were required. Firstly, it was important to be clear about what the social capital of migrant organizations looks like. Fennema and Tillie took the network of interlocking directorates as an indicator. Herein, however, social capital was regarded as involving more than this. It is likely that many organizations maintain a great deal of contact with each other, even if this is not formally registered. Accordingly, it is important to take the informal contact network into account, as well as the links at the formal level. The network of interlocking directorates was based on data from the archives of the Chamber of Commerce (Amsterdam) and the Vereinsregister (Berlin), both of which contain details of all formally registered Turkish organizations and their board members.

The contact network was determined by interviews held with the representatives of Turkish organizations in the two cities. Using a structured questionnaire, these representatives (preferably the chair) were asked about the contacts that their organizations maintain with other organizations. This produced an ‘ego-network’ for each organization questioned, and, when taken together, these made up the contact network.

The manner in which social capital is mobilized (the second research question) was investigated by way of a field experiment: the Big World Experiment. This owes its name to the aim of the research: finding out how extensive the world of voluntary organizations is in ethnic communities. In other words, how many organizations are reached during a mobilization process? As part of the experiment, the organizations which were interviewed during the earlier phase of data collection were invited to attend a lecture on the ‘art of networking’, during which the speaker would present the results of the first part of the study and discuss the significance of networking for voluntary organizations. Furthermore, each invitee was asked whether there were other organizations that he/she thought would also be interested in attending the lecture. If an organization was mentioned, its contact details were duly noted, with the research team
approaching these organizations, inviting them to the lecture, and putting the same question to them. This snowball method resulted in a network of organizations which referred to each other. This was termed the mobilization network.

In each city, the network of interlocking directorates and contact network (the social capital) were compared to the mobilization network (the mobilized social capital). Among the characteristics examined were the shape and nature of the networks, the central actors therein and the amount of bonding and bridging (mobilized) social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the ties between actors which are similar in terms of relevant features (here: ethnicity, type of organization), whereas bridging social capital concerns the links between actors which differ from each other with respect to these same characteristics. Finally, the ties between migrant and governmental organizations were also taken into account.

3. The results

Within the open political opportunity structure in Amsterdam, the social capital of the city’s Turkish organizations had developed into a horizontal network; there were no leading organizations operating on a different, higher level. The social capital included relatively many inter-ethnic links (bridging social capital), as well as a great deal of contact between the migrant organizations and local government. The community consists of ideologically opposed groups of organizations. Internally, these groups are closely connected, but there are very few connections between groups. The characteristics of the social capital, including ideological divisions, significant ethnic diversity, and the extent of the contact between organizations and the government, were also obvious in the mobilization network.

Within the closed POS in Berlin, the social capital of the Turkish organizations has a vertical structure; two umbrella organizations are each in a prominent position in the organizational landscape. Each of these has many organizations connected to it, both member as well as sympathizing organizations. These umbrella organizations achieved their pivotal position in the community for a large part because the local government selected them as two of the few focal points for its subsidy policies and as dialogue partners. The relatively dismissive stance of the government has led to it being regarded with skepticism by the Turkish community, and has caused this population to be internally focused. The result is an independent community, with a well-organized mobilization, in which influential actors are easily and frequently reached and a message travels quickly. Similar to the case of Amsterdam, the structure and nature of the social capital in Berlin determined the mobilization process. In the latter city, however, there were several collaborative bodies (more than in Amsterdam) which contributed to the social capital, and some of them played a crucial role during the mobilization. The largest of these, the Migrationsrat, had a central position in the mobilization network,
and thereby connected ideologically distinct groups (the different ideological groups were unconnected during the mobilization in Amsterdam). The umbrella organizations served as focal points for the smaller organizations.

It transpired that the openness of the political opportunity structure influenced the structure and nature of the social capital of the Turkish communities in both Amsterdam and Berlin. The POS and the composition of the social capital subsequently affected the way in which the latter was mobilized. It was not possible to determine a univocally positive or negative relationship between the openness of the POS and the (mobilized) social capital. In some respects, an open POS is positively related to the social capital of migrant organizations, for example, as can be seen in the greater amount of ethnically bridging social capital they possess, while there is a negative relationship with the initiatives taken by the migrant organizations. This was more prevalent in the closed political opportunity structure. However, the differences between the two cities were clear enough to enable us to conclude that the POS does influence both social capital and social capital in operation.

4. The conclusions

An alternative research method was used in this study, namely the Big World Experiment. Many social science researchers are hesitant about using experiments, but these fears are unfounded. What is more, by using this unorthodox method, it is possible to actually demonstrate how social capital works, instead of simply making assumptions. This is not possible with other approaches to the issue. With this study I, therefore, want to make a plea for the greater use of experimental methods in the social sciences.

In summary, it transpired that the openness of the political opportunity structure influenced the social capital of migrant organizations. An open POS resulted in a more horizontal network, while a closed POS led to a more vertical network. This also had consequences for the mobilization of a community. In a horizontal structure, the mobilization was more fragmented, while in a vertical arrangement a smoother and more comprehensive mobilization could occur.

So far as the theory is concerned, this study has clarified that it is better to consider the social capital of organizations as the combination of the network of interlocking directorates and the contact network, rather than just as the former. As expected, the two networks complemented each other and overlapped only to a limited extent. Furthermore, many of the contacts from the contact network were addressed during the mobilization process, while those from the network of interlocking directorates were not. On the other hand, it did transpire that the nature of the relationships between the organizations which addressed each other during the mobilization resembled those that
existed in the network of interlocking directorates. The relationships in both the network of interlocking directorates and the mobilization network were characterized by a high degree of similarity between the actors.

This study has also provided empirical evidence of the validity of the individual-collective perspective on social capital (one of the four outlooks in the typology presented herein). By adopting this approach, it is possible to map how individual organizations contribute to the functioning of the social capital of the community as a whole.

Some issues were not addressed in the current study, but certainly deserve attention in the future. The possibility that the topic which triggers the mobilization determines the course thereof is one such example. An investigation of the effect of different kinds of information on the mobilization of social capital could thus be a matter for further research. Other possibilities include: the implementation of the experiment in different ethnic communities, the comparison of the results within migrant communities and the non-migrant majority, the comparison of the working of social capital in migrant communities and in the country of origin, and the influence of board members who are born and raised in the host country on the shape and operation of social capital.