DIFFICULTIES IN MEASURING BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL AMONG POLISH FARMERS

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Abstract
Social capital is a popular concept and in the last decade researchers aimed to empirically verify its theoretical assumptions. It seems to be relevant to distinguish between bonding social capital and bridging social capital, as they can have different outcomes. Even though theoretical division between these two types of social capital is clear, in practice a researcher faces serious problems with operationalising the concept. Some of the difficulties result from the fact that a certain group can be of bonding or of bridging type at the same time, depending on the context. In the case of Polish farmers each village could be called a group of bonding type just a few decades ago, but recent changes in socio-economic situation and lifestyles force search for a new definition.

Key words: farmers, bridging social capital, bonding social capital.

Introduction
The first known use of the term “social capital” took place in 1916, in a work written by state supervisor of rural schools in the United States, however this work was not known to the wider public. In the 1990s this concept gained wider popularity, partly thanks to the books by Robert Putnam. Recent interest in this concept resulted in creating various definitions of social capital and willingness to empirically verify theoretical assumptions. The simplest definition of social capital can be as follows: “whereas economic capital is in people’s bank accounts and human capital is inside their heads, social capital inheres in the structure of their relationships. To possess social capital, a person must be related to others, and it is these others, not himself, who are the actual source of his or her advantage” [10, p.7]. Generally speaking, most of the authors agree that social capital is strongly connected with norms, trust, and networks. For example, Narayan defines it as “the norms and social relations embedded in the social structures of society that enable people to coordinate action and to achieve desired goals” [5, p.59].

Bonding and Bridging Social Capital – the Theory
According to the current knowledge, it makes a difference whether people cooperating and sustaining contacts are very much alike or differ significantly; this is why concepts of bonding and bridging social capital were recognised. In general terms, bonding social capital is observed in a group of people that share similar characteristics, while bridging social capital is a feature of a group whose members differ one form another.

It is agreed upon that social capital of bonding type in observable within groups of people of similar status in socio-economic, ethnic, religious and other terms [5, p.60-71]. Naturally, relationship between people of similar kind is more likely to
strengthen links within a group, and consequently there is higher possibility that the group member will get help in need [1, p.237]. Moreover, one could expect that the others share similar norms and their behaviour is predictable. On the other hand, bonding social capital might have some negative aspects, as well. To begin with, a closely tied group can have negative effects on non-members, if a group aims to use the members’ solidarity against the law, such as mafia, cartel or neofascists. In some cases a very coherent group excludes (on purpose or unintentionally) non-members from positions and opportunities. Finally, very strong bonding social capital can develop hostility towards non-members, thus undermining bridging social capital in a society [10, p. 21].

At the same time, too strong internal ties within a particular group can have negative consequences for the members themselves. Generally speaking, old ties in a community can encourage people to act together, but at the same time it can “reinforce inertia and a reluctance to change old ways of doing things” [6, p.193]. To give a common-sense example, new farming methods may not be adopted by certain villages, because it is not the way the forefathers were working. This is because very strong solidarity within a group sometimes demands conformism from each of its members, and results in excluding everyone who behaves differently [12, p.36].

Having described positive and negative effects of bonding social capital, we should discuss the bridging one, that is connecting people of different kind. Membership in a group whose members have varying characteristics brings different outcomes than if the members are very much alike. Bridging social capital enforces personal contacts [12, p.2] and exchange of information. It is very important, because people differing from each other can give access to new information while those who share similar characteristics in socio-economic, religious, occupational, and other terms usually share also similar knowledge [5, p.71]. Bridging social capital does not cause negative effects, but its positive effects are very vulnerable if not supported by solidarity created by bonding social capital. The reason for this is that it is difficult to create solidarity within a group that is seriously differentiated. Generally speaking, “open networks are more efficient for obtaining information, while closed networks are more effective for securing adherence to rules and norms without costly enforcement mechanisms” [4, p.64]. Concluding, certain degree of both bonding and bridging social capital is needed if a group wants to be active and effective in achieving the goals of its members. Dependence of development on proportion of bonding and bridging social capital was illustrated by Andrew Woodhouse with the use of the following graph (Fig. 1.).

According to it, a community with low level of both bonding and bridging social capital can be called “a disengaged one”. In such communities there are few interactions among members, and people are very reluctant to cooperate. In case when there is a low level of bridging social capital, but relatively strong bonding ties within groups can be observed, we have a “blinkered community”. In such situation a community is relatively strong, but stagnant. It is caused, among others, by truncated exchange of information and poor access to external knowledge, technology, and political participation [13, p.93].
A community characterised by many connections with groups outside but at the same time with very low internal solidarity can be called an ephemeral community. An example for it is when there are many short-time or seasonal workers coming and leaving the place. This situation gives access to external knowledge, but does not make people cooperate. Finally, the most desired type is an engaged community, with a high level of bonding and bridging social capital at the same time. The arrow on the Figure 1 shows direction of economic growth. While at the early stage of economic development pure bonding social capital is satisfactory, later stages require bridging social capital, as well. As a consequence, it is essential to distinguish bonding and bridging social capital when assessing impact of social capital on the level of development.

**Practical Problems with Operationalising Bonding Social Capital**

It has to be emphasized that distinction between bonding and bridging groups strongly depends on the context. Before any analysis is conducted it is important to identify where the borders between bonding social capital and bridging social capital lie and how they are constructed [3, p.4]. Moreover, as Putnam observed, “many groups simultaneously bond along some social dimensions and bridge across others. The black church, for example, brings together people of the same race and religion across class lines” [11, p.23]. This statement suggests that in practice it is almost impossible to separate groups creating exclusively bonding or bridging social capital. Nevertheless, for methodological reasons, these two types of social capital should be recognised and described separately, and only later relationship between them should be analysed. The following part of this paper concerns recognising bonding social capital among Polish individual farmers.

In the past, reaching as far as to the 19th century, there were very strong connections within each village. Even though the peasants were reluctant to associate,
they cooperated one with another in the form of neighbourhood help [8, p.29]. Consequently, members of the same village could be called a group of bonding type, because any kind of contacts with people not inhabiting this village required additional effort. With time, feeling of togetherness within a village was declining, due to a number of reasons. However, many villages had a feeling of togetherness strong enough to organise joint work for the benefit of their inhabitants, such as building schools, local shops, or installing water pipes and telephones.

When asking questions concerning the feeling of togetherness within a particular village, many researchers received the following answer: some time ago the village used to be characterised by high solidarity, but now it is over. It is possible that there was no significant change and this answer reflects merely nostalgia for the past times. However, there were certainly some changes in the farmers’ lives that justify weakening of intra-village ties. To begin with, in the second half of the 20th century there was an influence of the technical progress. Private cars allowed people to travel independently one from another and as a consequence a chance to chat to a neighbour on a street is much lower than when people were walking or travelling by horse wagons or bicycles. Moreover, common use of TV encourages people to stay at home and use individual forms of entertainment instead of organising joint feasts [8, p.30].

In the 1990s, with the change of the system, there were several new reasons that undermined feeling of togetherness within a village, beginning with the polarisation of incomes. Additionally, globalisation caused that farmers have more and more links with the external world, that is external markets, national and international institutions, lobby groups, and others [9, p.93]. Moreover, since the mid-1990s there are more people working in the cities who decide to settle in the countryside. These newcomers are more open for changes and fell much less solidarity with other villagers [7, p.75]. When a farmer does something unusual, in a more diversified village there is less pressure for conformism.

Another influencing factor is recent EU accession which resulted in strong pressure towards production specialisation. Many farmers decide to focus on crop production or animal breeding, so the production profile within a village becomes more diversified. As a consequence, farmers lose the feeling of togetherness which used to be a common feature of a village in the past. Innovative individuals, who would like to introduce radical changes, look for support outside their villages, usually among farmers with similar production profile. Similar goals and problems encourage them to create associations that with time shift from merely business organisations to groups of colleagues based on loyalty and solidarity [8, p.36-39]. As a result, for farmers with specific production profiles, it would be branch association that forms a group of bonding type, and not the village anymore.

It is also interesting to have a look at the young people, because their approach towards their community will shape the future of the countryside. Generally speaking, young people do not find their village a coherent community. One of the symptoms of this kind of thinking is that they do not expect receiving support in need from other villagers or local institutions. However, they can imagine getting such support from their families, and partly also from the closest neighbours. The
youngsters are aware of the fact that in a difficult situation they can count on their neighbours more than on the local authorities and institutions. At the same time their feeling of togetherness in the neighbourhood is weaker than in the peer group, even though reliance on the peers declines with age [2, p.73-74]. It is an open question whether opinions of the youth are symptoms of the generational change, or their approach towards local community will change with age. Nevertheless, currently young people do not see their village as a coherent group of bonding type.

Conclusions

The analysis revealed that there are problems in operationalising term “bonding social capital” in the case of Polish farmers. Few decades ago a researcher could assume that a single village is a group of bonding type. However, globalisation, production specialisation, mass media development and other factors caused that while defining bonding social capital one cannot use merely place of living as a criterion. One of the alternatives is to define bonding group as “farmers producing on similar scale and living in the same commune (NUTS5)”, but some of the farmers prefer to cooperate with people sharing similar worldviews and opinions, no matter where they live. In the case of farmers that specialise in specific production a bonding group would probably consist of farmers with the same specialisation and living in the same region. There is some problems with small-scale or mixed farmers who do not look for professional contacts in wider area. In their case an option is to define bonding social capital as the closest family (parents, children, and siblings). However, even this definition has some shortcomings. Generally speaking, recent changes in the countryside have widened the world of the Polish farmers, thus the issue of defining bonding social capital needs further discussion and research.

References


ПРОБЛЕМЫ ИЗМЕРЕНИЯ СВЯЗЫВАЮЩЕГО КАПИТАЛА СРЕДИ ФЕРМЕРОВ ПОЛЬШИ

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Аннотация
Концепция социального капитала приобрела популярность, и на протяжении последнего десятилетия исследователи нацеливают свой научный поиск на эмпирическое подтверждение ее теоретических положений. Представляется уместным определить различие между соединяющим и связывающим социальным капиталом, поскольку они производят различный эффект. Даже при теоретической ясности отличия этих двух типов социального капитала, в прикладном аспекте исследователь сталкивается с серьезными проблемами практического использования концепции.

Некоторые из этих трудностей возникают в результате того, что определенная группа может быть одновременно и связанной, и соединенной в зависимости от обстоятельств. На примере фермеров Польши показано, что каждое село еще несколько десятилетий назад могло бы называться группой связанного типа, однако недавние изменения социально-экономической ситуации и образа жизни вынуждает искать новое определение.

Ключевые слова: фермеры, соединяющий социальный капитал, связывающий социальный капитал.