

Identity and belonging

An aspect of the relational dimension of social capital

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of identity and belonging within the relational dimension of social capital. It emphasises that identity and belonging are key elements of social capital, alongside the structural and cognitive dimensions. The conceptualisation of social capital in terms of structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions has been widely adopted, building on previous discussions of structural and relational embeddedness. Shared identity is strongly associated with various aspects of social capital and has important implications for collective outcomes. It orients individuals towards shared goals, strengthens their obligations to the group or community, enhances social support, improves collective efficacy, and facilitates collective action. A shared social identity fosters a sense of unity, togetherness, solidarity, and community spirit. It cultivates feelings of belonging and solidarity, facilitating trust and cooperation. Individuals simultaneously identify with multiple social groups based on factors such as family, geography, education, ethnicity, and interests. Social identity provides acceptance and satisfies the innate human desire for affiliation and belonging. Developing identity and belonging within a social group entails aligning with group objectives and values, accepting group norms, and investing time and effort in the group. Shared identity reinforces accepted behaviours, shapes norms, and fosters expectations and obligations among group members. Joining a group involves a commitment to group expectations and obligations, and membership becomes intertwined with one's reputation and sense of self-identity. Strong shared identity motivates collective action for the group's benefit and deters actions that undermine group goals. However, it is important to recognise that close-knit groups and strong shared identities can also lead to conformity and limit creativity and innovation. As with other dimensions of social capital, the relationship between shared identity and outcomes can be nonlinear.

Introduction

Identity and belonging are commonly mentioned as elements of the relational dimension of social capital. The other dimensions of social capital are the structural and cognitive dimensions. This conceptualisation, distinguishing between structural, relational, and cognitive dimensions, is one of the major approaches to social capital. This approach was systematically explored and elucidated by Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998), building on Granovetter's (1992) discussion of structural and relational embeddedness.

A shared identity is strongly associated with a variety of aspects of social capital and has important implications for a range of outcomes. It orients actors towards shared goals, intensifies obligations towards the group or community, increases the likelihood of social support, improves collective efficacy, and empowers collective action (Burbaugh, 2015; Ntontis et al., 2020).

A shared social identity involves actors seeing themselves as one with other people and enables perceptions of unity, togetherness, solidarity, and community spirit (Ntontis et al., 2019). It inspires feelings of belonging and solidarity, and the sense that others are "one of us" which makes it easier to trust and cooperate (Hsu & Hung, 2013; Putnam, 2007). Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998: p.256) defined identification as "the process whereby individuals see themselves as one with another person or group of people". A strong sense of identity and belonging is associated with motivation to achieve group goals (Uhlener et al., 2015).

Having shared identity means recognition and commitment to the common good, and a willingness to sacrifice some personal interests for the sake of "we" – the group, community, or society (Belyaeva, 2019). It comes from the innate human desire for social identity. It provides acceptance and fulfills the need to be affiliated with the "in" group. There is value and emotional significance attached to membership (Tajfel, 1981).

Individuals identify with various social groupings simultaneously based on family, geography, education, gender, ethnicity, religion, sporting and interest groups, various economic factors, and any grouping that involves

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membership. The significance of social identity has long been recognised in social psychology (for further details see Tajfel, 1981; Turner et al., 1987).

The development of identity and belonging in a social grouping requires “buy in” to group objectives and what the group stands for. To identify with a group means some degree of acceptance of the norms and values of the group. Shared identity defines and reinforces accepted behaviours among members of the group or community. Identity powerfully shapes and reinforces norms as well as expectations and obligations (Holtkamp & Weaver, 2019). People are more likely to interact, cooperate, and trust others who share a social identity (Han et al., 2014).

Joining a group requires investment of time, effort, and often other resources to develop identity and belonging, and membership becomes linked to reputation and sense of self identity. Group members tend to embrace its history and narratives, shared language, and shared goals. Membership provides access to a variety of benefits such as social support, access to resources, and opportunities to improve one’s personal and community situation (Tzanakis, 2013). Identity creates a commitment to group expectations and obligations and a reluctance to risk exclusion. This powerfully motivates action for collective benefit and deters exploitive or opportunistic actions that undermine group goals.

Strong shared identity can have negative outcomes where close-knit groups can create a tendency for conformity and “group think” which can limit creativity and innovation and ultimately constrain action (Stern, 2013). As with many other aspects of social capital, there can be nonlinear relationships with outcomes.

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