Social capital in Bourdieu’s, Coleman’s and Putnam’s theory: empirical evidence and emergent measurement issues

Michael Tzanakis

Abstract

The theoretical formulations on social capital of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam have greatly contributed to the currency of the concept. Yet, while the concept enjoys an expanding popularity in interdisciplinary research, conceptual ambiguity and misspecification persists. Lack of agreement in defining social capital is reflected in the operationalisation of the concept. While many refer to ‘social capital’ or ‘measures’ thereof, they are unlikely to refer to the same thing or that the measures employed are reliable, valid or comparable. This is all the more evident in Putnam’s formulation and the body of research it has generated. This review argues that such research is plagued by unresolved measurement issues which do not help to clarify the nature of the concept. This critical review addresses the similarities and differences among the theoretical formulations of the three prominent theorists focusing on empirical research that assigns a causal role to social capital. It is argued that as a concept, social capital offers great heuristic potential but that it cannot be treated as an aggregate trait of large collectivities. Aggregate measures of social capital lack both reliability and validity and are inconsistent with theory.

Keywords

Bourdieu; Coleman; Putnam; social capital; trust; closure; networks; ties; communitarianism; development; solidarity

Full Text: PDF

Refbacks

There are currently no refbacks.

What differentiates between various theories of social capital is how they add other elements to the social network core. The article then shows the importance of four aspects of social capital: the goals and utilities of actors who employ social capital, levels of definition, the coverage of social capital, and types of social capital. Conceptualizing social capital is a very difficult task. This is because, as Coleman (1988, 1990) points out, social capital exists between actors; it is not attributable to an actor like human and economic capital are. A variety of definitions have been proposed to capture the concept of social capital. In contrast to Putnam and Inaba, Lin (2001a: 29) adopts a more individualistic view of social capital, adding resources to the social network core.