

Opinion

Reconsidering social capital under Covid 19: its relevance at family, household, and community level

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This short article seeks to contribute to the debate concerning the longitudinal conceptualization of social capital, in particular the difference between household and family social capital, as well as reconsideration of the growing potential importance of community social capital as low-income urban communities collectively struggle to survive in the context of Covid 19.

Keywords: Household social capital, Family social capital, Community social capital, Covid 19

DESCRIPTION

Social capital is commonly defined as the rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity, and trust embedded in social relations, social structures and the institutional arrangements that enable society's members to achieve their individual and community objectives. It is embedded in micro-level social institutions at community and household level, as well as referring to the rules and regulations governing formalized institutions in the marketplace, the political system and civil society. The concept of social capital, as an intangible asset, has always been highly contested. While the theoretical work of such scholars as Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam and Portes elaborated on it, others, such as Harriss and Fine, critiqued it, linking the concept to neoliberal economics and the paring down of the state [1,2].

It has subsequently been superseded by such concept as urban social movements (revisited) and co-production. So, is it useful to revisit, and to reaffirm the robustness of the concept longitudinally as well as in the current global environment?

In my own research, undertaken since 1978 in Indio Guayas, an urban informal settlement in Guayaquil, Ecuador, I further theorized the concept by differentiating between two levels: community social capital, the trust and cohesion within communities essential for mobilization for basic services; and household social capital, the trust and cohesion in intra-household structures [3-5]. The identification of social capital at the household rather than family level reflected that the family unit, irrespective of location, based on kinship, marriage/partnership and parenthood, should not be conflated with the household, a socio-spatial residential unit based on co-residence for production, reproduction, consumption and socialisation. This has been a longitudinal study with

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anthropological and sociological research living in the community, overtaken over the past forty years. Panel data results between 1978-2004 measured that household social capital increased over time, while community social capital declined. Complementing this, the narratives of community members showed why this happened. Successful community mobilization, contestation and collaboration with the local state resulted in the delivery of a range of physical and social infrastructure, leading to the declining importance of community organizations. Concurrently, the privatization of social services, such as childcare and health, meant household required more members, particularly women, earning income to pay for such services [6].

However, further comparative research in 2018, alongside a documentary film, *Calle K*, highlighted the complicated and crucial intergenerational reciprocities of mothers, daughters, fathers, and sons. This profoundly affected their success in addressing structural blocks in their quest to achieve professional status, whether it is parents ensuring their children accessed secondary education, better educated sons facilitating their fathers to complete studies and formalize informal skills, or daughters supporting their mothers, so the latter could stop working. They also provided support addressing the downside of Indio Guayas, in this case drug addiction, with mothers providing support structures to help ensure their sons' successful drug rehabilitation this led me to reflect on my conceptualization of household social capital as a socio-spatial concept in earlier work, and to recognize its limitations for long-term processes, with family social capital more likely to survive, irrespective of spatial location.

Most recently, Covid 19 has also led me to reassess, once again, family and community social capital. Is the pandemic resulting in further accumulation of either, or the further erosion of both

in low-income urban communities? To date research results have been few, and the evidence from Indio Guayas has been anecdotal, recounted over WhatsApp phone calls and Facebook. The journalistic stories from Guayaquil have been shocking; in April 2020 Ecuador had one of the highest death rates in Latin America, primarily in Guayaquil. TV footage showed hundreds of dead bodies kept in homes, or wrapped in sheets dumped on the roadside, cardboard coffins and cemeteries no longer able to bury them. The inability of a dysfunctional state, with a collapsed public health system, to cope with this appalling pandemic, reinforced the importance of families coping with COVID-19 mostly on their own, with limited government support. People, particularly women, fearing for their lives and those of their children, turned, first and foremost to their trusted reciprocal family networks for daily subsistence needs, with links often stretching beyond the house and block, to those living within the neighbourhood and beyond [7,8].

Under the pandemic mobility restrictions, few local organizations have been active, while the historic decline in the importance of the original community-based organization, its long-term leader now deceased, has made it almost impossible to resurrect, due to lack of trust combined with pandemic mobility restrictions. Nevertheless, very local-level altruism to help those most affected-even if very limited-has slowly increased. The lack of city-level or women's NGOs, with resources and initiatives, severely limits the current level of community social capital. As in many contexts, such civil society organization will be crucial in reviving further social capital as the crisis continues or to sustain it once the pandemic is over. In conclusion, this case study serves to illustrate not only the robustness, but also the long-term importance of social capital, and thus contributes to the debate concerning the utility of social capital as a concept.

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