

Bowling alleys and social capital

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The contribution of Robert Putnam

You might ask what bowling alleys have to do with social cohesion? Or even what relationship exists between individual health predictors and membership in a book club? Or why volunteering for a charity, attending a council meeting, joining a savings club, or even belonging to a local soccer league or church group builds the strength of a democracy?

The answer is social capital.

Social capital is the interconnecting of networks and relationships among people who live, work and play in a particular society. Social capital is a tangible resource that exists and is available to people (and sometimes, entities) by virtue of their networks. Social capital is the asset we enjoy that exists because of the social relations that we create and maintain. It also refers to the collective values which arise from these networks. The higher the levels of social capital, the healthier the society, both in terms of civic engagement and shared norms. Although the term capital is used by analogy with other forms of economic and human capital, unlike economic capital, social capital is increased and amplified rather than decreased by use.

The term social capital is often attributed to Harvard professor of public policy, Robert D. Putnam, and a book he published in 2000, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Much like the earlier essay on which it was based, the book surveyed the decline of social capital in the United States since the 1950s. The decline in social capital was a direct result of declining associational life. It might seem peculiar to think about bowling alleys in the same breath as social well-being, shared norms and muscular democracy. The bowling alley is a metaphor: bear with me.

Putnam's research reviewed the widespread decrease in participation in organisations and associations by Americans and described a country in which people appeared more socially isolated and disconnected than they had in the decades between the post-war years and the new millennium. In this period, attendance at civic meetings declined by 58%, and inviting people to one's home decreased by 43%. In general, people interacted less with each other: even family dinners declined by 33% in these years. Putnam observed that Americans' direct engagement in politics and civic life had also fallen sharply, despite the fact that average levels of education – generally a robust individual predictor of political participation – rose during this period. Using the rather whimsical example of bowling as a metaphor, he argued that, while the number of people bowling had increased, those who bowled in an organised leagues or teams was down by 70-80%, exposing a snapshot of a bigger societal picture in which people were less connected to each other in all civic activities and less engaged in associational life. Americans were literally and metaphorically bowling alone. Putnam concluded that if people were bowling alone, they were also not participating in social interaction and civic discussions. The bowling alley provided Putnam with a trope with which he could explore ideas relating to social capital. More generally, he examined the impact of social capital on social networks, cohesion and reciprocity. Indeed, although Putnam's research concerned America, his insights are useful globally. But back to bowling: *Bowling Alone's* impact went, and still goes, far beyond academia.

In the sidebar, Putnam is also clear that the decline in civic engagement is both driven and exacerbated by the rise of the omnipresent screen—whether television, internet or phone, which “privatizes our leisure time”. In a recent interview, Putnam argued that watching commercial entertainment TV is the only leisure activity where doing more of it is associated with lower social capital. But, what about other kinds of social engagement on digital platforms? Surely, we build social capital with the many hundreds, even thousands, of ‘friends’ with whom we interact online every day, often in virtual communities of shared interests, hobbies or political viewpoints? Do our digital communications not animate our political life and build shared social norms? Are digital networks not creating real social capital?

Putnam argues not. He argues that whilst we connect with more people online, we are, in fact, less connected with other people in everyday life. Online connections are not a proxy for organisational participation, with the consequence that we are less connected in the big picture, with our broader communities, and in the small, with our families. Even as digital contacts are a network, and people are, in principle, more connected, these are virtual and electronic communities and not qualitatively the same as face to face community. Putnam points to clear evidence that says that having 'real' friends makes you happier. Happiness increases with additional friends (interestingly, up to 20 friends) but this is not true in digital friendships: the one is not a substitute for the other. Greater virtual connection and the increased use of the internet might allow people to interact with new people and more often but it has been found to physically displace individuals from social capital. In later work, Putnam calls this the theory of time displacement. Time spent online is time not invested in face-to-face communication. People are relying on digital media to gratify both their social and psychological needs. However, therein lies the rub: while digital interaction might facilitate the increase of virtual ties, it diminishes and disturbs social capital. Heavy social media users are more vulnerable to social dislocation, social isolation and reduced associational life, all of which are critical for social capital. One might say that digital networking is less bowling alley, more surfing.

Social capital is helpful in understanding real-life social networks and community. Significantly, social capital itself helps to develop and reinforce norms, and builds social trust for mutual benefit. As societies become less and less homogenous, social capital is all the more important as people engage with people who are different from them, and navigate social arenas that are more challenging. Moreover, social capital also appears to be invaluable communal glue: cementing this trust, reciprocity, information sharing, and cooperation associated with social networks. The premise is that social capital is valuable (the sum of social networks, shared values and norms of reciprocity that arise): societies that have greater social capital function more successfully and efficiently. Although methodologically challenging to quantify, social capital is not a fuzzy, feel-good notion, but a resource with measurable and tangible benefits.

The data holds up. Following Putnam, social scientists have discovered a wide range of empirical evidence which suggests that the performance of social institutions and the quality of public life are strongly influenced by social capital. Indeed, our notion of the basis of a vibrant society and a strong pluralist democracy integrates concepts of social cohesion and connectedness, shared norms and vibrant civic engagement. In short, at a macro level, basic societal health and democratic stability rely powerfully on social capital. We know that when citizens intermingle often, engage in associational life and build trust, their relationships underpin democracies. Indeed, once a democracy is established, these networks and relationships extend citizen's access to information, which in turn, enhances accountability by governments. At a micro level, researchers in such diverse fields as education, development, urban poverty, migration, politics, economics, poverty, unemployment, health, and even the management of crime and drug abuse, have discovered that positive outcomes are more likely to occur in civically engaged communities.

The impact of social capital on whole communities, as well as individuals, warrants further attention. The influence of social capital on health indicators is especially interesting. Remarkably, health policy research has found that joining a group, with its associated opportunity for engagement and interaction, reduces by half the odds that one will die the following year. In a similar vein, it was demonstrated in other research conducted in 2010 by Hold-Lunstad that people with weaker social ties had a 50% increased likelihood of dying prematurely than those with stronger social networks. This translates as a health risk equivalent to smoking some 15 cigarettes a day, and 'was more predictive of early death than the effects of air pollution or physical inactivity'—astonishing findings by any measure. Similarly, in other research examining the impact of social capital on health in 14 European countries, researchers confirmed the strong causal relationship between community/individual health and social capital. Another meta-study found that social capital which is characterised by feelings of trust and reciprocity was shown to be inversely associated with common mental health disorders. Higher levels of reported social capital are associated with a lower risk of mental illness. Health policy targeting individual social capital has a double impact: delivering conditions for individual health, and in turn, increasing community social capital.

The value of social capital is much more than the process of people joining clubs, associations or participating in organised activities. It's more than the sum of its parts. It is greater than a network of people who assist you to find employment when you move from one place to another, who help you navigate bureaucracy or help you to negotiate power structures. Social capital is built by engagement. Importantly, this engagement is not inclusive of virtual digital networking or connecting on social media platforms. Digital relationships might strengthen already existing real relationships but cannot be a proxy for these when it comes to creating and supporting social capital. For some social scientists, social capital provides the safety net in times of political and economic uncertainty, and both builds and strengthens the norms and values of our shared social and political life. Social capital is strengthened in real relationships, in each instance, and through each engagement. As we build social capital, we simultaneously reinforce both our societal and individual health. We know this intuitively and deeply.

Perhaps it's time to close your Facebook, shut down your Twitter feed, and join a community choir or a competitive bowling league?