

# Leisure, social capital and civic competence

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**Abstract.** Initial enthusiasm over social capital—since the mid-1990s among the most widely debated concepts in social science—is being tempered by increasing criticism. With some exceptions, this development is not reflected in discussions of leisure and social capital, which remain dominated by Putnam's early formulation of social capital as a combination of cultural norms, generalized trust, social networks. After what may be called the psychological and cultural turns in leisure research, it is not surprising that leisure researchers found Putnam's early formulation attractive. Their continued reliance on it is problematic, however, especially since criticism of its conceptual weaknesses has led Putnam to shift his ground. He now locates the sources of social capital in social networks, not cultural norms. Putnam's shifts reflect central themes in the wider transdisciplinary social capital debate, little awareness of which appears in leisure research. These themes require attention if the relationships among leisure, social capital, and community development are to be clarified. Until then, social capital's value in leisure research remains heuristic rather than explanatory. Social capital illustrates the need for rigorous conceptual and theoretical analysis, directs attention to the significance of social structure, and raises questions about the purposes of leisure research, including its relevance to social policy and action. Ultimately, social capital challenges the field to pursue truly transdisciplinary inquiry, as an excursion into the relationships among leisure, social capital, a resource model of citizenship, and civic competence is intended to illustrate.

**Keywords.** social capital, conceptual rigor, social relevance, trans-disciplinary inquiry

**Résumé.** Les travaux de Robert Putnam ont canalisé un attrait irrésistible envers le capital social en examinant toute une série d'enjeux sociaux et économiques au cours des dernières décennies. À quelques exceptions, l'approche du capital social en sciences de loisir est dominées par la première conceptualisation du capital sociale par Putnam c'est-à-dire. le capital social est l'ensemble des relations, des réseaux et des normes qui facilitent l'action collective. Certains chercheurs inspirés par les approches psychologiques et l'analyse culturelle, place beaucoup de confiance à cette thématique, tandis que

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d'autres sont plus prudents. Autant plus que la critique du capital social et ses faiblesses conceptuelles à mené Putnam a révisé sa thèse. Tandis que ces révisions nous expliquent que la provenance du capital social est l'ensemble des relations des réseaux social, elle n'explique pas l'influence des normes culturelles dans nos sociétés. L'influence des discours transdisciplinaires et le décalage de Putnam apparaissent très rarement dans la recherche en loisir. Si les rapports parmi le loisir, le capital social, et le développement communautaire vont être avancés dans l'étude en loisir, elles devront être reconnues et élucidées. D'ici là, la valeur du capital social dans l'étude en loisir demeurera une hypothèse heuristique plutôt qu'une hypothèse explicative. Par rapport à une enquête véritablement transdisciplinaire, le capital social devient une analyse conceptuelle et théoriquement rigoureuse, qui dirige l'attention à la signification de la structure sociale, et soulève des questions au sujet des objets de la recherche de loisir, y compris sa pertinence avec la politique et l'action sociale. En ce sens, le capital social devient agent provocateur.

**Mots clefs.** capital social, cohérence conceptuelle, pertinence sociale, enquête transdisciplinaire

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Seldom has a social science concept generated the sustained level of discussion as social capital has since the publication of Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* in 1993 and several subsequent essays.<sup>1</sup> Putnam's massive *Bowling Alone* (2000) further intensified an already raging debate. Though social capital is not a new concept and in fact incorporates themes central to the development of modern sociological theory, as Portes (1998) points out, its current notoriety is chiefly the result of Putnam's work. This circumstance has shaped discussion of social capital in important but not altogether fortunate ways. Recalling how this occurred provides a useful starting point for assessing social capital's place in leisure research.

### **The Putnam Effect**

In *Making Democracy Work*, an examination of government reform in Italy, Putnam and his associates reported three findings of particular interest. Two have been at the core of the social capital debate; one is directly relevant to leisure studies. Taken in this order, these findings are that government reform was most successful in regions of Italy where the "vibrancy of associational life" was highest, that support for and engagement in democratic politics was strongest where associational life was most vibrant, and that the "primary spheres" of Italian associational life were "recreational and cultural associations" (1993a, p. 91; p. 92, Table 4-1; pp. 91-120 generally). To explain these findings, Putnam (1993a, p. 89) appealed to de Tocqueville's classic argument in *Democracy in America* (1969) that voluntary associations sustain democracy because they have salutary effects on their members individually and

therefore on their communities generally. Putnam (1993a) summarized these effects as facilitating “norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement” (p. 167) and labelled them collectively as *social capital*, attributing the term to Coleman (1990). Putnam went on to define social capital as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (p. 167). The same formulation was used in three articles published in respected academic and opinion journals (1993b, 1995a, 1995b). With *Making Democracy Work* acclaimed as an instant classic, Putnam’s work was guaranteed attention in scholarly circles, the popular media, and even the more obscure corners of academia (Hemingway, 1999b, 2001).

Putnam’s early definition of the term thus came to exercise nearly hegemonic influence on the burgeoning interest in social capital. It has been used mistakenly (at best), selectively (at worst), and in any case too frequently to emphasize trust and norms as the core components of social capital. Continuing appeals to the authority of this definition are mildly ironic, if not misplaced. Not only has the definition been properly criticized for its assumptions about trust and norms, and indeed for including them at all (e.g., Levi, 1996; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Wuthnow, 2000), but Putnam has revised his early definition several times in the face of this criticism. He now defines social capital as “connections among individuals—social networks” (2000, p. 19), with reciprocity and trustworthiness (“trust” has been dropped) no longer separate components of social capital co-equal with social networks but rather norms “*that arise from*” social networks (emphasis added). Finally, despite Putnam’s acknowledgements of debts to other researchers, uncritical acceptance of his early definition continues to overshadow alternative conceptualizations of social capital that offer richer prospects for social inquiry. Such inattention is particularly unfortunate with regard to Bourdieu’s work (e.g., 1984, 1985, 1987), in which social capital is examined as a feature of the social networks through which regimes of economic, political, and social power are sustained (see Blackshaw & Long, 2005; Hemingway, 2001, p. 4). Other valuable work in fields like management and organizational behaviour also deserves greater attention (e.g., Burt on structural holes in networks and network effects; see 1992, 1997, 2000).

Putnam’s early work appeared at a time when social trust, trust in public institutions, and traditional civic and political participation were apparently at all-time lows in the US (see Dalton, 1996; Orren, 1997).<sup>2</sup> His analysis reflected several widely circulated explanations for this situation

but was distinguished by its central focus on voluntary associations and Putnam's evident faith in the inherent benefits of social capital (somewhat qualified in *Bowling Alone*). By treating voluntary associations in general terms, Putnam avoided an awkward confrontation with the effects of power differentials in society (precisely what Bourdieu's conceptualization of social capital is intended to address). His alarm over the decline in social capital by which he explains reduced civic engagement is balanced by his conviction that social capital is a potential asset for reinvigorating civic engagement. Putnam's analysis could thus be received as both even-handed and engaged, not altogether common characteristics in recent political discourse.

### Conceptual Difficulties

Empirical details in Putnam's analyses have always been challenged, but recent critics have questioned the conceptual meaningfulness of social capital itself. Some suggest it is in fact time to "disinvest" in the concept (Foley & Edwards, 1999; see also Kadushin, 2004). I am unwilling to go that far, but it is discouraging that discussions of social capital in leisure studies, particularly in periodicals for recreation professionals and introductory textbooks, remain uninformed by the transdisciplinary conceptual debate on social capital and fail to recognize how Putnam's conceptualization of social capital has changed (fortunate exceptions are Arai & Pedlar, 1996, 1997; Glover, 2004a, 2004b). These shortcomings must be repaired for the concept to have any value in leisure analysis.

Conceptual rigor is imperative. Recall Putnam's early definition of social capital as "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks" (1993a, p. 167). Putnam treated each of these "features" as exogenous to the others and explained variations in social capital across the regions of Italy as the result of historical path-dependent relationships among cultural values (trust and norms, particularly reciprocity) and social structure (networks). He described these relationships as developing over centuries, being relatively immune to sudden change, and influencing contemporary economic, political, and social development. Yet in his 1995 essays on the US, where Putnam raised the alarm about dramatic declines in social capital and voluntary association memberships in part through the negative effects of television watching, his time frame shrank from centuries to the forty-five year period between 1950 to 1995. Putnam did not explain why the historical path dependency reported as a change-resistant central feature of the relationship between social networks and culture in Italy was either inoperative or inapplicable in the US,

though he relied on the same conceptualization of social capital in both cases.

Putnam's inconsistency creates a conceptual problem. If trust and reciprocity are exogenous to social networks and if social capital levels are the consequence of long-term interactions among social structure and these cultural values (both points are argued in *Making Democracy Work*), then short- and even mid-term interventions to increase social capital by strengthening social networks are unlikely to succeed because social capital is also affected by factors exogenous to social networks. Although this strategy, popular among community development activists (e.g., Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Green & Haines, 2002), is intuitively appealing, there is no conceptual warrant for it in Putnam's early work. We can say more than this, however. If strengthening social networks leads to normative shifts (e.g., greater reciprocity, higher trust levels), then cultural norms are not exogenous but rather endogenous to social networks. Putnam's early conceptualization of social capital must then be either seriously revised or discarded.

Other flaws in Putnam's early conceptualization are illuminated by Newton's (2001) complaint that researchers commonly conflate three aspects of social capital: norms and values, social structure, and the consequences of social capital. Putnam may be indicted on two counts here. First, his emphasis on formal social organizations, particularly voluntary associations, distorts social capital's role in civic engagement. These organizations, though central in the civic arena, are by no means the only significant, civically relevant sites for social capital generation. Consider, for example, friendship or discussion circles in the home, neighbourhood, at work, and at third places (see Huckfeldt, Johnson & Sprague, 2005, and the literature cited there). Such informal sites satisfy Bourdieu's durability criterion (1985, pp. 248–49) and are more likely to generate significant social capital in leisure than are formal but transitory or intermittent networks formed in tour groups, summer camps, and the like. Second, Putnam defines social capital with reference to a single consequence, "facilitating coordinated actions" (1993a, p. 167). This consequence does not really take us very far: Most social networks, formal or informal, entail coordinated action in some form. More interesting are the differential effects of various social structures. Different organization types, for example, produce different levels of political engagement among their members (Pollock, 1982). They also differ in the levels of social capital generated, the range of organization members with access to it, and the purposes for which it may acceptably be used

(Eastis, 2001). Such complexities are not addressed in Putnam's early conceptualization.

### **Social Capital: Networks, Not Norms**

These difficulties can be eliminated by conceptualizing social capital as an aspect of social networks, with the norms governing individual action treated as endogenous to the networks in which the action occurs. A network approach allows more precise identification of the factors facilitating and constraining social capital generation, making them more accessible to research and policy intervention. It is also attractive because it may rekindle interest in the *social logic* of leisure (the term is Zuckerman's, 2005). Such renewed interest would be fitting because neglect of leisure's social logic after the field's psychological and then cultural turn is a major reason for the misplaced emphasis on cultural values in leisure research on social capital.

If social capital is indeed *capital*, then like other forms of capital—physical or economic, human or informational—it must be a resource that facilitates action. It is *social capital* because unlike other forms of capital, it cannot become the property of a single individual. Social capital is a collective resource, generated within social networks; its viability depends on the networks' continued existence. If a network dissolves, the social capital within it is lost; if members exit the network, they lose the social capital previously available to them within it. Social capital consists of social ties allowing one network member (A) access to resources over which another network member (B) has control. The resources in question may be additional social capital in the form of B's social ties or they may be informational, physical, or economic capital. Access to these resources within a network is generally barred to non-members.

Social connectedness by itself does not constitute social capital. The social capital available to people is determined by the number and type of social networks to which they belong, the nature of their ties to other network members, and the types and amounts of the resources controlled by the other members. Access to resources in a social network is not automatic; knowledge of them and skill in navigating the network are required. Human capital is thus intimately related to social capital and its use (Lin, 2001). Despite the impression created by Putnam's early work, it is an error to assume all members are equally able or entitled to draw equally on the social capital within a network. Equal access to resources does not characterize social networks in general.

Individual action occurs within bounded fields of action (see Clemens & Cook, 1999; Nee & Ingram, 1998). Social networks are among

the structural factors shaping these fields. Interactions among network members are significantly determined by the social roles members occupy. Expectations are attached to each social role, independently of any specific individual who occupies it but applicable to all who do so. The encoding of role expectations stretches across a continuum from the explicit to the tacit. Mastering role expectations is an essential part of learning to navigate and act within a network.

Norms are endogenous to social networks because they are attached to role expectations, some applying to all members simply as members and others to specific roles in the network. Consider two of the norms widely emphasized in social capital research, trust and reciprocity, which are associated with familiarity and the absence of uncertainty in social interaction. Role expectations reduce uncertainty by enabling network members to predict other members' behaviour accurately. Suppose, for example, that one expectation attached to the role of neighbour is "helping out when asked." This expectation may well be found in many different networks of neighbours, but it becomes operative only when neighbours *mutually* recognize each other as members of a specific network and *mutually* acknowledge the role expectations this brings with it. The norms governing specific interactions among neighbours are embedded in these role expectations. My neighbour must have reason to expect that if he holds the ladder for me this fall, I won't leave him hanging from the roof next spring. His trust that this will not happen is grounded in our mutual understanding of the expectations attached to the social role of neighbour, not in a general cultural norm. Such general norms certainly exist, but are applied in the bounded fields within which people act, fields shaped in part by social networks. When I call my neighbour a *good neighbour*, it is with reference to expectations attached to the role of neighbour in *our* specific network of neighbours.

The greatest challenge facing social capital researchers is to specify the processes by which social capital has the effects claimed for it. This challenge is particularly difficult for the generalized cultural norm approach because social capital tends to remain within the social networks where it is generated and because people tend to keep their multiple social networks separate, including role expectations and norms endogenous to those networks. Trust is not stimulated by social interaction as such, for example, but rather by close, regular social interaction (Wuthnow, 1999, p. 214), much of it occurring in homophilous personal networks (Louch, 2000). Homophily also characterizes voluntary associations. People tend to join organizations with members much like themselves; within organizations, people tend to associate more with the other

members *most* like themselves (McPherson & Smith-Lovin, 1987; but see Warde, Tampubolon, & Savage, 2005). This tendency is not particularly fertile ground for generalized norms of democratic citizenship.

### **Refiguring Social Capital, Leisure and Citizenship**

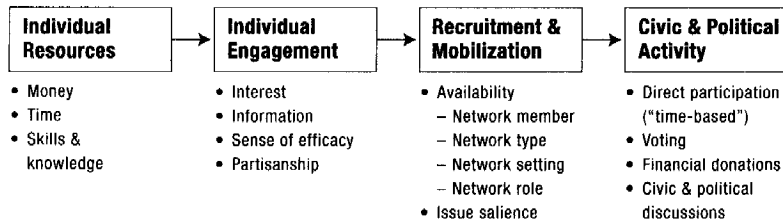
Putnam's findings on the significance of leisure-based voluntary association memberships for civic engagement addresses an aspect of what I refer to as the *Aristotelian linkage* between leisure and citizenship. This linkage is derived from Aristotle's definition of a citizen as "one who shares in governing and being governed" (*Politics*, 1283b–84a) and his observation that in ancient Greece it was commonly agreed the citizens "in a well-ordered state . . . should have leisure" (1269a). Leisure is today, as it was then, among the resources necessary for sharing in governing and being governed. Today as then, how to provide these resources is a sharply contested issue intimately connected with alternative forms of government and citizenship.

The Aristotelian linkage is a useful beginning point for critical analysis of leisure's political significance (Hemingway, 1999a). It directs attention to how leisure affects, and is affected by, the status of citizenship; to the activities fundamental to citizenship, the resources and skills necessary for those activities, how such resources and skills are acquired, distributed, and to whom; and to the mechanisms by which citizens are recruited and mobilized for civic activity. Approached from this perspective, the significance of leisure-based voluntary association lies not in the creation of generalized norms of civic engagement, as Putnam argues, but rather in social network effects on civic competence and civic recruitment. These effects are not equally distributed within any social network, including voluntary associations, just as all social networks are not equally rich sites for development of civic competence or equally attractive to civic recruiters. Whether the civic consequences of leisure-based voluntary association memberships have the democratic content Putnam and others claim is therefore at best a very open question. Two US studies, noteworthy for their scope and rigor, will help us answer it.

In their exhaustive analysis of civic and political activists, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) reported that the resource mix available to individuals was the most important determinant of individual civic participation (see pp. 271–72 for the following). Based on this, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady proposed a resource-based model of civic engagement (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1**  
**A Resource-Based Model of Civic and Political Engagement**



*Note:* Derived from Verba, Schlozman, & Brady (1995) and Rosenstone & Hansen (1993)

Individual resource mixes are shaped by two factors, the first consisting of the “fundamental involvements ... in major social institutions” (e.g., the family, education, work, and informal or formal social networks) that constitute an individual’s “socially structured circumstances,” referred to earlier as a bounded field of action. The second factor consists of the “constrained choices” that individuals make within their socially structured circumstances, across which resource availability varies, often considerably. In some circumstances even the best choices will not overcome systemic or local constraints, while in other circumstances poor choices nonetheless yield substantial resources (which goes some way toward explaining current US presidential politics). Understanding these factors is particularly important because the effects of prior resource availability tend to be reproduced through subsequent differential access to fields of action in which resource availability is further enhanced or constrained.

The development of civic competence—civically relevant knowledge and skills, with awareness of opportunities to use them—illustrates this process and the effects of social capital on civic engagement. Formal education is of course a major resource that facilitates the development of civic competence in several ways, including the type of work for which an individual is prepared. Work reinforces the civic competence effects of formal education because during adulthood, opportunities to develop civic competence are concentrated in the workplace (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, p. 378, Table 13.3). Preparing and making presentations, for example, or organizing and directing work groups require knowledge and skills readily transferred to civic settings. Such tasks are most commonly performed by managers and professionals, that is, by those who usually have had better access to formal education resources. Note, however, that these and related tasks also may be part of active

membership in leisure-based voluntary associations. Certainly voluntary associations reflect differential resource distributions no less than other social structures, but they may provide some individuals with otherwise unavailable opportunities to develop civic competence.

Such opportunities would likely remain insignificant in themselves were nonwork voluntary associations not important sites for civic recruitment, at rates close to those of civic recruitment in the workplace (again, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, p. 378, Table 13.3). Here the Verba, Schlozman, and Brady study reinforces Rosenstone and Hansen's (1993) earlier analysis of social networks' centrality to civic recruitment and mobilization.

Rosenstone and Hansen (p. 156) found that "dense levels of social contacts" allow individuals to acquire more information about civic activities and opportunities to participate. Further, the better individuals are placed within *multiple* social networks, the greater their likelihood of becoming actively engaged (p. 159; see also Coleman, 1988, pp. S108–09, on multiplex social ties). There are several reasons for the relationship between social network position and civic recruitment. Recruiters are more likely to target individuals already known to them, whose strategic network locations create many social ties, who have demonstrable knowledge and skills useful for civic activities, and who are more likely to receive recruitment efforts favourably (Rosenstone & Hansen, p. 33). The central importance of social structure for generating social capital relevant to civic engagement is evident. It is also clearly evident that the combination of differential resource availability (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady) with civic recruitment patterns skewed toward "the organized, the employed, the elite, and the advantaged" (Rosenstone & Hansen, p. 33) has consequences for the development of civic competence that are by no means re-assuring for creating democratic communities.

## Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether social capital's explanatory power will match its undoubted heuristic value. More, and more rigorous, analysis is required before this power will be known. It can fairly be said, however, that the necessary rigor will not be achieved so long as social capital is misconceived as a set of cultural norms or mistaken for a set of outcomes. Both errors allow the intrusion of unwarranted value-based assumptions that create serious problems. Enthusiasm for the concept must not obscure social capital's basic features. Social capital is about networks, resources in networks, and access to resources. The concept des-

ignates features of social networks whose presence tends to facilitate action within those networks. Social capital is in itself content neutral; its use reflects the individual and collective purposes of members of the networks in which it is located. Absent coherent, durable social networks, social capital will not exist, nor will it exist if too few or no resources are available. Social capital requires human capital. Individuals must know what resources exist in their networks and how to gain access to them, but there is nothing automatic about the necessary skills and knowledge.

Along with such chicken-and-egg dilemmas, practical experience and the research literature offer sobering reminders that social capital's presumed democratic consequences are also far from automatic (with previously cited sources, see Szreter, 2002). This caveat applies not only because social capital has a "dark side," as critics have long argued, or because interconnected elite social networks subvert democracy, but more importantly because even the well-intentioned civic use of social capital may disrupt democracy. Using a provocative simile, Grew (2001) writes that "Social capital is like potential energy. Its transformation into kinetic energy lies in conjunctures and events, which may reduce the value of some forms of social capital while increasing others" (p. 95). Social capital can contain considerable civic energy; its unfettered release may be dangerous. Several French republics did not lack for civic engagement and the Weimar Republic collapsed largely through convulsions of kinetic civic energy (as Berman, 1997, has pointed out). If these examples seem too far fetched, consider that the 2004 US presidential election saw the highest voter turnout in recent memory, but the majority of those voters returned to office an administration decidedly lukewarm toward popular democracy and opinion, an administration originally installed in power by unprecedented and extra-constitutional judicial intervention in a national election.

Democratic communities, like social capital, exist within bounded fields of action. Again like social capital, these bounded fields will contract unless democracy is actively defended and expanded. But democracy is considerably more fragile than social capital. Indeed, democracy is inherently at risk because it can be snuffed out by the very elements on which its vitality depends. Democracy requires more than social capital and civic engagement. Fundamental economic, political, and social equalities and freedoms are also necessary, with strong institutional and procedural safeguards. The best use of leisure in a democratic society may therefore be to cultivate the knowledge and skills necessary to ruling

and being ruled in turn, that is, the civic competence essential to defend and expand democratic equalities and freedoms. It is risky, arduous work, but it is the only way to ensure everyone's voice will be heard and aspirations included in building the communities in which we wish to live. That is democracy, and it would be about time.

## Notes

- 1 This is a revised version of a paper delivered to the research roundtable on Rethinking Leisure and Community Research organized by Dr. Troy Glover, University of Waterloo, and held in conjunction with the Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research, Nanaimo, BC, May 16, 2005. My thanks go to Troy for the opportunity to participate in the roundtable, along with my deep appreciation for his leadership and energy in organizing a very successful event. I should also acknowledge that this essay draws on a research literature dealing primarily with the United States, which is due entirely to my limitations rather than to any jingoistic impulses.
- 2 Putnam favours the word *civic*, as in civic engagement or civic participation, rather than *political*, the prevailing term in the political science and political sociology literature. The civic is always also political and may easily be as partisan, but it does extend beyond formal political processes and institutions, as a host of writers before and after Putnam has argued. Though I suspect many contemporary writers employ *civic* largely to avoid the negative connotations associated with *political* (on which, see Eliasoph, 1997, 1998), I will follow Putnam's usage.

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