

Roles

An aspect of the structural dimension

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Abstract

This article examines the significance of roles within the structural dimension of social capital, alongside the relational and cognitive dimensions. Roles are crucial in facilitating collective action by promoting predictable, productive, and efficient collaboration among individuals. They are essential for decision-making, resource mobilisation, efficient communication, activity coordination, and conflict resolution. Assigning actors to specific roles creates patterns of interaction that foster motivation and reasons for people to cooperate towards common goals. These patterns of interaction contribute to the development and strengthening of social capital, benefiting not only the group but also individuals and the broader community. Roles often create bridging and linking ties, enabling individuals to connect and access opportunities for advancement. Roles can be formal or informal, paid or unpaid, associated with titles or self-assumed responsibilities within social groups. They generate obligations, expectations, and social norms, reinforcing social identity and encouraging action aligned with group goals. Roles create shared understandings of normative behaviour associated with the role, facilitating efficient coordination and cooperation on complex tasks. Holding certain roles can positively impact personal circumstances, influencing actors to embody the expected characteristics of the role and elevating their social position and status. Acknowledgment and symbols of roles solidify shared understandings and further shape interactions involving actors. However, there is a risk that the elevated social status associated with prestigious roles may be exploited for personal gain, leading to transactional interactions and the erosion of social capital. Scholars have explored how social capital can reinforce social stratification, with Norman Uphoff being one of the few to discuss the relationship between roles and the structural dimension of social capital. Uphoff emphasised that accepting roles based on shared and mutual expectations patterns people's behaviour in predictable and productive ways. Roles in social capital literature are often mentioned but receive limited theoretical exploration, with little explanation provided beyond their inclusion as part of the structural dimension.

Introduction

Roles are commonly mentioned as an element of the structural dimension of social capital. The other dimensions of social capital are the relational 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.

Roles are an important aspect of the structural dimension of social capital that are important for facilitating collective action. Roles allow people to work together more predictably, fruitfully, and efficiently (Uphoff & Wijayaratna, 2000). Roles are important for making decisions, mobilising resources, communicating efficiently, coordinating activities, and resolving conflicts (*ibid*).

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The assignment of actors to roles creates patterns of interaction that create reasons and motivation for people to interact and cooperate with common purpose. For example, within a group when someone has a financial issue they would talk to the treasurer of the group and the treasurer may have reasons to engage with actors outside the group such as with financial institutions and other value chain actors on group financial matters.

These patterns of interaction create and strengthen social capital that can benefit the group, the actors, and community more broadly. Social capital is built and manifested primarily by social interaction, so structures that create interaction, particularly between actors who may otherwise not interact, are an important source of social capital. Roles often create bridging and linking ties that create opportunities to "get ahead".

Roles can be formal or informal and can be paid or unpaid. Formal roles are typically assigned to an individual and are associated with a title. For example, employment roles and positions on boards or committees. Informal roles can be self-assumed where an actor takes responsibility for a certain task or function within a

social grouping or acts in a way that creates habituated patterns of action that creates shared understandings related to the informal role. Actors can also informally assign roles to others over time through patterns of interaction. For example, group members may come to know that if you need travel bookings you go talk to Jane.

Roles create obligations and expectations and reinforce social identity which encourages action that supports group goals. Roles create tangible and powerful signals of social norms associated with the role. Actors both within the group and external to the group tend to have understandings of what is normatively appropriate and expected for the role – how someone in that role should act. This allows the efficient coordination of action with various benefits for social capital strengthening. Roles create various understandings that are necessary for people to work together on complex tasks.

Roles can change the personal circumstances of those actors involved. Actors may feel influenced to “act” like one should act in the role. This can ascribe feelings of esteem, confidence, and empowerment. Other actors tend to attribute certain characteristics such as trust, reputation, and goodwill to actors who hold certain roles. For example, a court judge may be assumed to be honourable, trustworthy, and reliable. These factors can elevate the social position and status of actors who hold prestigious roles. Greater acknowledgement of roles can accentuate these positive effects. Titles and other symbols of roles can solidify the shared understandings associated with the role and more strongly influence actions towards and involving actors.

However, there is the risk that elevated social status associated with prestigious roles can be used for personal gain and where the actor makes interactions transactional. In these situations, social capital can be eroded with detriment to the group and society.

Bourdieu explored how social capital can create and reinforce social stratification (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). One of the few scholars to systematically discuss how roles relate to the structural dimension of social capital was Norman Uphoff (Krishna & Uphoff, 2002; Uphoff, 1999; Uphoff & Wijayaratna, 2000).

“Creating social capital requires more than just introducing roles, since it is the acceptance of roles that patterns people’s behavior in predictable and productive ways. A role exists when there are shared and mutual expectations about what any person in a certain role should and will do under various conditions. These expectations need to be shared by both role incumbents and those persons who interact with that role. Social organisation is less costly and often more effective in cases in which cooperation is motivated by norms, values, beliefs, and attitudes that create reinforcing expectations, rather than the organisers having to gain cooperation through material incentives or coercive actions. While such incentives and actions may be involved in any complex set

of social relations, if they are all that produces intended behavior, this is a very expensive way to achieve results.” (Uphoff, 1999: p228)

Roles are often mentioned in the literature on social capital but there has been little theoretical exploration. Scholars tend to say “the structural form of social capital includes roles, rules, precedents, procedures and social networks” (Beukes, 2019: p4) without further explanation.

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