Shared language and codes
An aspect of the cognitive dimension of social capital

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Abstract

This article examines the importance of shared language as a fundamental element of the cognitive dimension of social capital. Shared language plays a crucial role in facilitating effective social interaction, enabling individuals to work together for collective action. It serves as a common conceptual apparatus, encompassing terms, vocabulary, and jargon specific to a social group or setting. Differences in language, including colloquialisms and context-specific meanings, shape communication within social contexts. Shared language fosters inclusivity, shared identity, and a sense of belonging, allowing individuals to "speak the same language" and build connections. Conversely, a lack of shared language can impede collaboration, exacerbating power differentials, and hindering the attainment of common goals. It weakens shared identity, solidarity, and trust, undermining collective action and participation. Effective communication and mutual understanding rely on the development of shared language through regular dialogue and sustained contact. Leadership and mechanisms for facilitating conversations and directing their nature are crucial for cultivating shared language and a strong sense of shared purpose. Measuring shared language poses challenges, as participants may not be fully aware of the extent of their shared language. It exists as an inherent part of day-to-day interactions within social groups, reflecting deep understandings gained from prolonged experiences. Much of it operates at a pre-reflective level, making it difficult to quantify. Recognising the significance of shared language contributes to a comprehensive understanding of social capital, emphasising the role of effective communication and shared understandings in fostering social cohesion and collective action.

Introduction

Shared language is commonly mentioned as one of the elements of the cognitive dimension of social capital. The other dimensions of social capital are the structural and relational 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.

Shared language is critical for effective social interaction which is necessary for people to work together for collective action (Eiteneyer et al., 2019). It provides a "common conceptual apparatus" that is essential for effective interaction and exchange (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Shared language includes the terms, vocabulary, and jargon that are used by a social group or in a social setting (Mohammed & Kamalanabhan, 2019). It can include scientific, academic, or technical terms and acronyms as well as the subtleties of language such as colloquialisms and words that carry specific meaning in that social

context (Chiu et al., 2006). Social groupings develop and use language differently and are the staples of day-to-day interactions (Sitton, 2003).

The common lexicon to 'speak the same language' connotes a comfort and similarity with others that is inclusive and associated with shared identity and belonging. Even the same words can have different meanings when used by people in different social settings and can create significant barriers to effective communication (Davenport & Daellenbach, 2011; der Kroon, 2002).

Shared language is an important part of the cognitive dimension of social capital that is vital to various other aspects of social capital. Social structures create the opportunity, the relational dimension helps to create motivation, and shared language provides the ability to create and use social capital. Social capital is built and realised by primarily by social interaction. Since shared language is required for effective interaction, it is essential to both the creation and use of social capital (Prusak & Cohen, 2001).

Different actors can use different language and a lack of shared language between actors can be a significant barrier to collaboration to achieve common goals (Fuller & Tian, 2006). A lack of shared language can highlight power differentials and emphasise differences and divisions that can impair the reaching of common

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goals and sense of common purpose that is vital for collective action. It tends to weaken the sense of shared identity (Davenport & Daellenbach, 2011) and therefore undermines solidarity and sense of belonging that is important to the development and maintenance of trust (Meek et al., 2019; Rao & Gebremichael, 2017). It can be a barrier to participation and interaction since people can feel uncertainty and a lack of confidence or embarrassment that they may not understand what is being said and that what they say may not be understood as they mean it. In a practical sense, a lack of shared language can make communication ineffective and make it difficult to reach mutual understandings (Chiu et al., 2006).

Shared language is developed by repeat contact and regular dialog between actors. This requires mechanisms and institutions to sustain such conversations and direct the nature and purpose of them. Shared language, like other shared understandings, is best developed when actors take a genuine interest in understanding the situation and perspective of others. Strong leadership can facilitate effective communication and shape a strong sense of shared purpose.

Shared language can be difficult to measure since actors are often not fully aware of what language is shared by a social grouping. Some language may be obvious, such as the use of acronyms and technical terms, but other more subtle shared language can be difficult to observe, especially where normal words carry slightly different meaning or significance. Shared language forms part of the background context of day-to-day interactions in social grouping. It reflects the rich and deep understandings gained from prolonged experience in the social context. Much of it is prereflective, making it difficult to measure since participants cannot be fully aware of it.

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