Shared narratives
An aspect of the cognitive dimension of social capital

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Article Info

Abstract

This article explores the role of shared narratives as a crucial component of the cognitive dimension of social capital. Shared narratives, encompassing myths, stories, and metaphors, provide meaning and order to human experiences, shaping the interpretations of events and observations. Narratives are integral to human nature, enabling individuals to understand and connect with one another, facilitating cooperative efforts and essential for survival. They frame the experiences of social groups, enabling members to interpret and comprehend their shared reality. Shared narratives, created through social interaction, foster shared understandings, values, beliefs, and goals, leading to a sense of belonging, solidarity, and trust within the group. Moreover, narratives allow for the anticipation of others' actions, facilitating collective action and deterring opportunistic behaviours. However, shared narratives can also have negative implications, such as reinforcing discrimination or excluding outsiders. Measurement of shared narratives poses challenges, given their embeddedness in daily interactions and their subjective and presuppositional nature. The article calls for a more robust theoretical foundation for empirical research on social capital, emphasising the communicative practices and shared narratives that encourage civic participation. Acknowledging the significance of shared narratives and their impact on intersubjectivity, this perspective challenges the dominant neoliberal ideology that prioritises rational self-interest, highlighting the subjectively constructed nature of human experience and action.

Introduction

Shared narratives are commonly mentioned as an element 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 narratives are commonly understood myths, stories, and metaphors that give order to human experience and solidify meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them (Fisher, 1984; Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Narratives are symbolic actions such as words and/or deeds (Fisher, 1984). Shared narratives are co-created through social interaction in the pursuit of meaning.

Narratives are an important part of our everyday experience (Naughton, 2014). They give meaning to our experiences and reinforce our chosen interpretation of events and observations. Narratives are logically consistent and justified explanations of what happened, why it happened, and what it means (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). They are an essential feature of human nature that allows us to "experience and comprehend life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles, and ends" (Fisher, 1984; p24). Events do not carry inherent meaning; meaning is derived from communication that (re)produces social order (Craig, 1999; Griffin, 2009).

The "narrative impulse" (Fisher, 1984) is a natural process of socialisation that allows us to understand each other and has allowed us to work together cooperatively, which has been, and for many continues to be, essential for survival (Rosenkranz, 2019). "Narrative is a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organising events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events" (Chase, 2005: p656).

As such, narratives function to frame the experiences of the group (Gray et al., 2007) and to allow members to interpret and understand their experiences in a common way (Bolino et al., 2002). The norms, values, and practices of a social grouping are not based on objective, a priori foundations, but are socially constructed through communication (Rosenkranz, 2019). Narratives are not fictions; they are interpretations of reality that situate truth within the context of socially constructed reality. Their propositions may be valid or invalid, or true or false.

They are 'versions' or 'interpretations' of reality that are socially constituted in the personal or shared reality of a social grouping. Narratives can involve different presumptions of villainy and senses of falseness (McGee & Nelson, 1985).

For example, when a small company is acquired by a larger company it could be described as being 'absorbed' but this could be described as a 'merger' which creates a different narrative that has significant meaning for actors. The 'absorbed' narrative (which is clearly far richer than one word but abbreviated here for convenience) implies the loss of identity, whereas the 'merger' narrative suggests the reconstruction of a shared identity. This simple example illustrates how subtle differences in narrative can illicit vastly different thoughts, feeling, and actions from the people involved.

For narratives to be effective they must have fidelity and coherence (Fisher, 1984). Fidelity is the degree of connection to reality and is closely linked to the observer's prior values and understanding (Fisher, 1987). The fidelity of a narrative can be evaluated by asking "does the story ring true"? Coherence is whether important details are omitted, facts are made up, or where other plausible interpretations are ignored (Griffin, 2009).

Returning to the earlier merger example, the storyteller can paint events as fair, justified, appropriate, and necessary, or frame it in a vastly different light. This does not change the truth, logic, or accuracy of the narrative, but the resulting values, feelings, and judgements can be vastly different.

Narratives are both intra- and well as inter-personal, and therefore both subjective and intersubjective. Shared narratives are interpersonal narratives that are known, understood, or believed by multiple people and are therefore intersubjective. Individuals use narratives to explain and to interpret their personal experiences (Alexander, 2012), and where these narratives are shared with others they tend to be co-created into shared narratives. In general, public narratives structure individual narratives (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011).

Shared narratives allow social groupings to construct shared understandings such as shared values, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as shared goals, purpose, and vision. These create a sense of belonging and solidarity that is linked to trust and that facilitates collective action (Bolino et al., 2002; Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2011; Subramaniam et al., 2013). Shared narratives allow people to develop a common perspective that enables them to perceive and interpret events in similar ways (Bolino et al., 2002). This allows people to anticipate and predict the actions of others, which is essential for collective action. The shared understandings resulting from shared narratives can deter unexpected or opportunistic actions. Shared narratives also tend to create and enhance the sense of social identity within a social grouping (Lee et al., 2019) which is associated with solidarity, belonging, and trust.

Shared narratives tend to be constituted within, or based on, meta-narratives. A metanarrative "is a global or totalising cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience" (Stephens & McCallum, 2013: p6). They relate to assumptions or rules that are often tacit and unspoken and lie behind day-to-day discussions or narratives (Walters, 2002). Since they are presuppositional they reflect the nature of the shared lifeworld and have a strong influence on the cocreation of shared narratives. Narratives can reveal actor's lifeworld and aspects of shared lifeworld. The cocreation of narratives creates overlap and congruence between the otherwise distinct lifeworlds of individuals. It creates intersubjectivity that is essential for interaction, exchange, and collective action.

Shared narratives, like some other aspects of social capital, can have downsides. Narratives, especially meta-narratives, can dominate explanation and understanding leaving little room for other interpretations. This can lead to the devaluing of anything and anyone seen as different and to discrimination (Miller, 2010). This is strongly associated with concepts such as cognitive lock-in and groupthink that can have negative consequences for decision making, innovation and creativity, and the this can result in exclusion and discrimination. Many aspects of social capital have non-linear relationships with outcomes, so it is important to understand both the potential benefits and downsides of each aspect of social capital.

Shared narratives can contribute towards the maintenance of privilege by defining what constitutes the acceptable 'in group' and its behaviour, to the detriment of outsiders (Ayios et al., 2014). Those with power have more opportunity to influence the shared narrative, however, those who communicate the most can establish counter-narratives that can take hold. The development and influence of shared narratives depend of various factors and are highly context specific.

Shared narratives can be difficult to measure since they are part of day to day interactions and their full meaning is only known to the individuals embedded in the social context, and even for them much of it is prereflective or presuppositional. When making observations, it can be difficult to know which narratives are widely believed and endorsed by participants. Like other aspects of the cognitive dimension of social capital, shared narratives are mostly prereflective.

There is also some question of causality. Some scholars have suggested that shared narratives are a manifestation of the cognitive dimension of social capital, for example Partanen et al. (2008), however this perspective ignores the nature of language being narrative in nature and the role this plays in the creation and recreation of shared understandings.

The existence of strong shared narratives would suggest a high degree of intersubjectivity and therefore congruence between the lifeworlds of actors. This is the form or nature of social capital since social capital is grounded in the basic structure of everyday life (or

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the so-called lifeworld) (Adam, 2011). However, shared narratives could be considered a source of social capital since the help to create shared understandings, as well as a manifestation of social capital since they can, to some extent, be observed. This highlights the dynamic nature of social capital; it is developed through use.

Whether scholars realise it or not, embracing the tripartite dimensions conceptualisation of social capital challenges the dominant paradigm that human behaviour is based on assumptions of rational self-interest and utility maximisation. From the discussion above we can see how the 'shared understandings' of the cognitive dimension of social capital relate to intersubjectivities or degree of lifeworld congruence. This contradicts the dominant neoliberal ideology that has amplified the prominence of the individual in society. Instead it supports the view that human experience is based on subjectively constructed reality and that human action is not motivated, either primarily or entirely, by survival and self-interest.

It is important for scholars to acknowledge this and more rigorously ground their empirical work on a strong theoretical foundation. A communicative approach to social capital recognises that it is not just social ties but social ties filled with communicative practices creating shared narratives that encourage and foster civic participation (Rojas et al., 2011).

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