

Two Conceptions of Social Capital in Malaysia

Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid^{a,*}, Noor Azizah Ahmad^b

^{a,b} School of Social Development
UUM College of Arts and Sciences
Universiti Utara Malaysia

*Email: shukri@uum.edu.my

Abstract

This paper discusses two conceptions of social capital in Malaysian society. The discussion is based on the findings of two separate studies on social capital in the state of Kedah, Malaysia. The first study employed a qualitative approach focusing on two religious communities in the Kuala Muda District. The second study utilised a survey method and had produced a localized instrument for measuring social capital. The findings from both studies illuminate some of the types of social capital that can be associated with the Malaysian social fabric. In the first instance social capital can be conceived as emerging from religious communal setting and comprises three (3) different yet interrelated social realms. These types of social capital can further be differentiated based on levels of social organization – the micro-level and macro-level. The second conception of localized social capital suggests that it can be measured based on six (6) areas of communal relations that can typically be found in Malaysian society. It portrays the importance of considering indigenous social setting in formulating localized conception of social capital. This paper concludes with a discussion on the implications that these findings have on social capital research in Malaysia particularly on how they can be utilised to investigate indigenous conceptions of social capital.

Keywords: *social capital, Malaysian society, religious community, communal relations.*

1. Introduction

As a concept, social capital has garnered immense attention amongst scholars for the last few decades. Despite of this upshot in popularity (see Halpern, 2005), the response towards its value as an analytical tool has been a mixed one however. On the one hand the proponents of the concept often praise the idea as something that is very beneficial academically (e.g. as a conceptual tool) as well as in real life (e.g. as a policy tool) (Putnam, 2000). On the other hand, there are sceptics who consider it as being too broad (Macinko and Starfield, 2001; De Hart & Dekker, 1999), meaningless (Halstead and Deller, 2015; Fine, 2001) or downright empty (Thompson, 2011). Essentially, what creates this divide can easily be seen from the variety of definitions offered for what it actually means. Some considers this to be the smoking gun that tells the story of conceptual uncertainty when its comes to the concept's true value (Portes, 1998).

One undeniable fact however is that the concept has been used extensively in many areas of research and even policy. In research, social capital has been shown time and again to be a useful concept in understanding the benefits of such intangible resources as friendship, neighborhood relations, family bond and racial ties (Putnam, 1993; Pekkanen, Tsujinaka and Yamamoto, 2014; Nason, Gonzalez L. and Sharma, 2013, Letki, 2008). In the policy arena, similar usefulness has been shown to have emerged from the application of the concept such as those demonstrated by the The World Bank (2011) and OECD (Scrivens and Smith, 2013).

Banking on what is considered the positive side of the argument, this paper argues that the concept has its value if applied with clearly defined scope.

As such any effort at conceptualizing and measuring social capital are deemed worthwhile. Particularly in the case of Malaysia, where the idea of social capital has yet to catch on, there are still much room for local intellectuals to venture into. As proposed by Krishna (2002), social capital should be looked upon as a concept which must be tailored to local situations in order to be useful. It is therefore the contention of this paper that any effort to specify and measure social capital using local setting should be given due attention in order to stimulate intellectual debates and thereby produce more indigenous ideas related to the concept.

As a country that has so much diversity, the task of identifying and measuring social capital in Malaysia can be challenging. A sweeping definition that tends to cover as much ground as possible has very little use in this kind of setting. Similar thing can be said about borrowing existing conceptualizations of social capital to be used in local context since the suitability of such measures can easily be brought into question. It is therefore imperative that a localized conception of social capital be formulated so as to identify the specific nature of the types of resources that can be used to measure it. This paper reports two studies which have been conducted to identify and measure social capital in this country. Both studies represent two distinct ways of conceptualizing social capital which in each case should reflect a localized conceptions of the construct.

2.0 Social Capital and Religious Life

The first study involves an in-depth investigation into the underlying processes of social capital formation. The study set out to discover how social capital can be conceived based on the actual patterns of community life. For that reason, a qualitative research design and a theory building approach were used to study closely the social relationship that exists in two selected communities in Kedah. The aim was to conceptualize social capital formation based on indicators derived and abstracted directly from data. In effect, the research design represent a non-conventional method of development of theoretical constructs. The outcome of the study was formulated into a framework that describes the typology and mechanics of social capital formation (Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid, 2014).

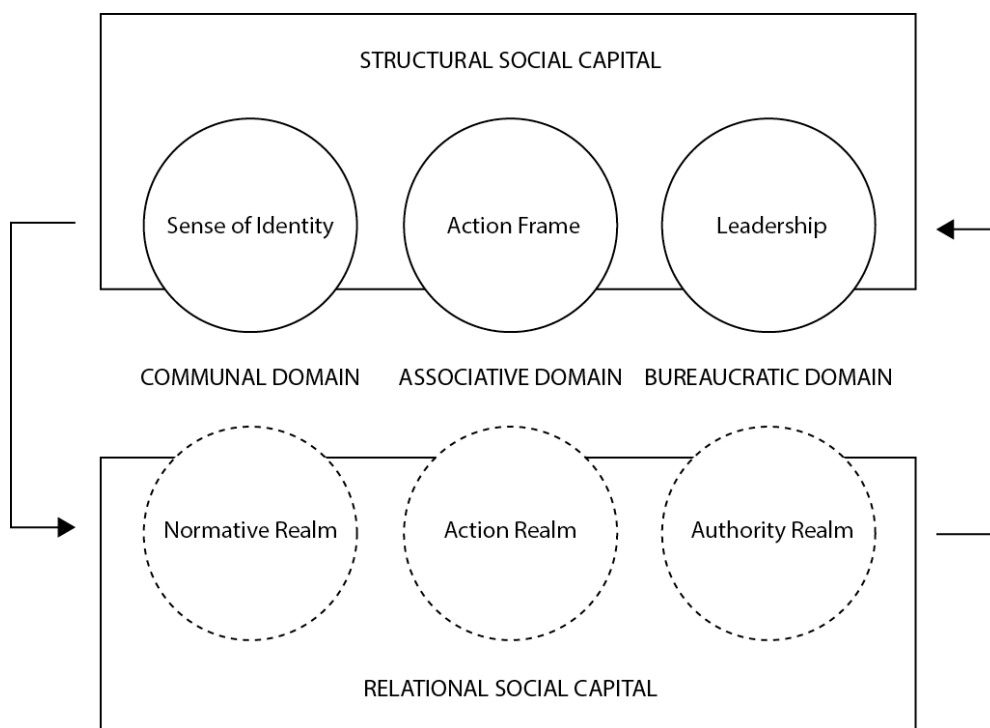
The findings suggest that vibrant communal life is a fertile ground for social capital production. In the two case studies, the communal relationship was facilitated by strong religious affiliation. The choice for the religious basis was deliberate since in many explications, religion was often cited to be one of the major sources of social capital. Hence, in both instances, community members showed a considerable attachment to religious practices. The attachment eventually translates into a highly productive community life in which a lot of benefits were generated for the members. As this study was conducted qualitatively, the evidence for such affiliations were also qualitative in nature. Amongst the observed indicators include:

- Strong sense of identity and high regard for community norms and values. Throughout both communities, the presence of shared norms were obvious. By and large community members share common views and demonstrate high admiration and attachment for their community. There was an aura of sense of identity coming from the members whenever they converse about their community. Because of this, whatever norms and values that were shared were observed and adhered to faithfully by community members.

- A noticeably active and influential authority structures that supervise the community affairs. Through these structures, various community activities were organized, the welfare of the less fortunate members of the communities were looked after and community norms were enforced with noticeable effect. The authority structures were closely related to the religious entities thus making them much more effective in managing the community affairs.
- A significantly high number of people turning up for religious events such as congregational prayer and religious lectures. Normally it is very challenging for a community to sustain a sizeable number of congregants who attend prayer sessions regularly, especially during odd hours such as the before dawn (*fajr*) prayer. Yet in these two communities, the numbers of people involved in such activities are relatively higher compared to other communities.

Further analyses of these evidence suggest that not only social capital can be conceptualized as resources that occur within different social realms, it also exists on different layers of social organization, i.e., the micro and the macro. The findings of this study reflect much of what has been theorized in social capital literature: that social capital is essentially multidimensional in nature. As shown in the framework in Figure 1 the social domains are typifications of different areas within community life capable of generating social capital. These domains are:

Figure 1 : An explanatory framework of social capital formation



Source: Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid (2014). The role of religious congregation in the formation of community social capital: A case study in the district of Kuala Muda, Kedah. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Universiti Sains Malaysia, p. 307.

1. Communal domain - a social sphere within the community in which people develop and share common values. The agreement people held towards certain set of values, norms and cultural practices is an indicator of the process of social capital production within this particular domain.

2. Associative domain - a social sphere where people actually engage one another through investment of time and energy. A belief in commonness and sharing of identity will amount to nothing if people still reluctant to invest time and money towards realizing them. Social capital is borne not simply out of conviction but also through action.

3. Bureaucratic domain - a social sphere where community affairs are administered, often by a structural entity that functions on behalf of the community. Certain amount of organizational competency is needed to translate different types of resources available in the community into social resources.

Because social reality is often viewed as comprising different layers of social organizations, the production of social capital can also be viewed as comprising of at least two different types: relational and structural social capital.

While the outcome managed to portray the inner workings of religious-based community leading to the production of social capital, the nature of the study itself offers very limited opportunity for generalization. It can be argued that, based on the patterns observed, social capital formation does occur in these two communities as shown in the framework, still, it might be a little bit ambitious to say that the same pattern also occur in other communities. It can however be concluded that in so far as the community bears a lot of resemblance with the sampled ones, such as in terms of the quality of relationship, the centrality of the religious institutions, and the active participation of its members, social capital may have been borne the same way as depicted by the framework.

3.0 Six Dimensions of Social Capital

The second study was also conducted in the state of Kedah using a quantitative approach (Najib Ahmad Marzuki, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid and Mohd. Sobhi Ishak, 2014). The study aimed to develop a set of indicators for measuring community social capital in local setting. But instead of developing the indicators from scratch, the study opted to use an existing measure of community social capital as a template. Bullen and Onyx (1998) has developed an instrument for measuring community social capital in five communities in New South Wales, Australia. While in terms of specifics communities that exist in Australia cannot be said to have much resemblance to those in Malaysia, yet the broad contours of community life in both countries (as well as many other countries in the world) are basically similar. For this reason, the study looked upon the existing measure developed by Bullen and Onyx to be a suitable model of measurement to form a basis.

In order to test the suitability of the original indicators in local context, two focus group sessions were organized involving 18 individuals from a local community. During the sessions, the participants were asked a series of questions that reflect the original social capital indicators. They were allowed to discuss freely about how they conceive the same ideas by reflecting upon their own social experiences. For example, in the original set of indicators, the construct 'participation in local community' contains such themes as volunteerism, involvement, membership, roles, participation and contribution. From the focus group discussion it was found that the themes differ quite significantly and were better captured by alternative themes such as responsibility and helping out (Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Najib Ahmad Marzuki and Mohd Sobhi Ishak, 2013).

Table 1 : A comparison between original instrument and the adapted.

Original Instrument (Bullen & Onyx 1998)		Adapted Instrument	
Social Capital Elements	No. of Items	Social Capital Dimensions	No. of Items
Participation in the local community	5	<i>Penglibatan dalam aktiviti komuniti</i>	12
Proactivity in a social context	6	<i>Proaktiviti dalam konteks sosial</i>	12
Feeling of trust and safety	5	<i>Rasa percaya dan selamat</i>	10
Neighborhood connections	5	<i>Hubungan kejiranan</i>	14
Tolerance of diversity	2	<i>Toleransi kepelbagaian</i>	10
Value of life	2	<i>Nilai kehidupan</i>	12
Family and friends connections	3		
Work connections	3		

Source: Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Najib Ahmad Marzuki and Mohd Sobhi Ishak (2013). Developing social capital indicators for Malaysian society: Some findings from a pilot study. Proceedings of 4th. International Conference on Education and Information Management (ICEIM-2013), p. 362

Out of the original eight (8) indicators as proposed by Bullen and Onyx, the study had identified only six (6) indicators that can be suitably used to measure social capital locally. Table 1 shows the comparison between the original indicators and the ones that were used in this study.

As shown in Table 1, all except two of the original indicators were retained. The two indicators which were omitted were found to be redundant or irrelevant. For example, it was found that the construct ‘family and friends connections’ was very much redundant with neighborhood connections. This is because in local context the distinction between friends and neighbors is often negligible.

The study proposes that in Malaysian context, social capital can be conceptualized and measured along these six (6) dimensions:

- Participation in local community (*penglibatan dalam aktiviti komuniti*). This dimension refers to the extent to which people get involve in community affairs. In Malaysian context, this translates into behavioral manifestations such as helping people, joining community activities and becoming part of community.
- Proactivity in social context (*proaktiviti dalam konteks sosial*). This dimension measures the extent to which people are willing to take an initial step in making something worthwhile, such as removing obstacles, keeping the environment clean and initiating good deeds. This kind of behavior also involves disregard for compensation or reward.
- Feeling of trust and safety (*rasa percaya dan selamat*). Feeling of safety while alone is one of the manifestations of social trust. Trust is often accompanied by the feeling of safety. In Malaysian neighborhood, the ability to walk alone at night without fear is a significant indicator of social capital.
- Neighborhood connections (*hubungan kejiranan*). Keeping good relations with neighbors is one of the hallmarks of Malaysian society. To a large extent, neighbors rank alongside friends and family in terms of the type of relationship that should be fostered.

- Tolerance of diversity (*toleransi kepelbagaian*). Being a multicultural and multireligious society, Malaysians are accustomed to the idea of racial, ethnic and religious tolerance. Being able to tolerate differences amongst people of different social background is another crucial measure of localized social capital.
- Value of life (*nilai kehidupan*). Value of life measures the outlook that one has over one's life, particularly in relation to one's community. A positive outlook towards one's life indicate satisfaction with being part of a community. It reflects on how one perceives the treatment from the surrounding community.

The findings of the study suggest that localized social capital, while on the outset appears to comprise similar set of indicators as that of the original source, yet the distinction are actually in the way the constructs are defined and conceptualized bearing the conditions and cultural content of local communities. Cultural differences and practices have a very significant impact upon the way social capital are conceived. In similar vein, for a measurement to bear meaningful result, the indicators used to gauge the occurrence of social capital should be made to reflect local customs and practices.

4.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This paper presents two studies on social capital in Malaysia. The aim is to demonstrate distinct ways the concept of social capital can be conceived within local context. The first study suggests that social capital is a resource that emanate from tight community setting. In this instance strong religious affiliation is the core that makes the community rich in social capital. The findings echo many assertions made by scholars about the nature of social capital - that it can be a social resource generated at the level of community. A significant aspect about social capital that this particular study had managed to portray is that there are at least three (3) social domains which can be found in a typical community capable of producing social capital.

The second study develops indicators for social capital that are deemed suitable for local context. The study utilizes an existing measure of social capital as a foundation for a similar attempt but using local setting. A combination of qualitative interviews and quantitative method of analysis has managed to produce an instrument of measurement. The outcome is a set of six (6) indicators of localized social capital. The resulting indicators are reflective of existing conceptualization but the content and context in which the indicators were produced reveal some significant differences within the idea of social capital as it exist in local setting.

Interest in the idea of social capital in this country has yet to bloom. If global trend is an indication, it is simply a matter of time before the idea becomes mainstream amongst scholars in Malaysia. It is therefore imperative that there exist a realization towards the need to generate more localized conceptions of the concept. For a construct that is very complicated and multidimensional as social capital, more research needs to be carried out and more exploration made towards enhancing our grasp of the idea. More indigenous conceptions of social capital will enable more accurate understanding and measurement which is crucial if such understanding and measurement are to be used towards critical ends.

5.0 References

- Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid, 2014. *The role of religious congregation in the formation of community social capital: a case study in the district of Kuala Muda, Kedah*. Ph.D. Universiti Sains Malaysia.
- Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Najib Ahmad Marzuki and Mohd Sobhi Ishak, 2013. *Developing social capital indicators for Malaysian society: some findings from a pilot study*. In: Proceedings of 4th. International Conference on Education and Information Management (ICEIM-2013), pp. 361-367.
- Bullen, P. & Onyx, J., 1998. *Measuring social capital in five communities in NSW – a practitioners guide*. [pdf] Available at: <<http://www.mapl.com.au/pdf/scquest.pdf>> [Accessed 15 June 2015].
- De Hart, J. and Dekker, P., 1999. Civic engagement and volunteering in the Netherlands: A 'Putnamian' analysis. In: J. Van Deth, M. Maraffi, K. Newton and P. Whiteley, eds. 1999. *Social capital and European democracy*. London: Routledge. pp
- Fine, B., 2001. *Social capital theory versus social theory: political economy and social science at the turn of the millennium*. London: Routledge. Ch.4.
- Halpern, D., 2005. *Social capital*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Halstead, J. M. and Deller, S. C., 2015. Social capital and community development: an introduction. In: J. M. Halstead and S. C. Deller, eds. 2015. *Social capital at the community level: an applied interdisciplinary perspective*. London: Routledge. Ch.1.
- Krishna, A., 2002. *Active social capital: tracing the roots of development and democracy*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Letki, N., 2008. Does diversity erode social cohesion? Social capital and race in British neighbourhoods. *Political Studies*, 56(1), pp. 99 – 126.
- Macinko, J. and Starfield, B., 2001. The utility of social capital in research on health determinants. *Milbank Quarterly*, 79(3), pp. 387-427.
- Najib Ahmad Marzuki, Noor Azizah Ahmad, Ahmad Shukri Abdul Hamid and Mohd. Sobhi Ishak, 2014. *Pembentukan indikator modal sosial komuniti: ke arah penjanaaan instrumen modal sosial komuniti di Malaysia*. FRGS Research Report. Universiti Utara Malaysia.
- Nason, R. S., Gonzalez L., A. C. and Sharma, P., 2013. Exploring transgenerational entrepreneurship: the role of intangible resources. In: P. Sharma, P. Sieger, R. S. Nason, A. C. Gonzalez L. and K. Ramachandran. eds. 2013 *Introduction: exploring transgenerational entrepreneurship: the role of resources and capabilities*. Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing. Ch.1.
- Onyx, J. and Bullen, P., 2000. Measuring social capital in five communities. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 36(1), pp. 23-42.

Pekkanen, R. J., Tsujinaka, Y. and Yamamoto, H., 2014. *Neighborhood associations and local governance in Japan*. New York: Routledge.

Portes, A., 1998. Social capital: its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, pp. 1-24.

Scrivens, K. and Smith, C., 2013, *Four interpretations of social capital: an agenda for measurement*, [pdf] OECD Statistics Working Papers, 2013/06, OECD Publishing. Available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jzbcx010wmt-en> [Accessed 10 June 2015].

Thompson, D., 2011. Social capital and its popularity. *International Journal of Social Inquiry*, 4(11), pp. 3-21.

World Bank (2011). *Overview: social capital*. [online] Available at:<<http://go.worldbank.org/C0QTRW4QF0>> [Accessed May 2015].