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Measuring religious social capital: the scale properties of the Williams Religious Social Capital Index (WRSCI) among cathedral congregations

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Abstract

The theoretical construct of social capital remains contested in terms of conceptualisation and measurement. The present paper follows the convention of distinguishing between trust, bonding, bridging and linking social capital, to conceptualise how religious communities promote and develop social capital within a specifically religious cohort. Developing this construct of religious social capital further, this paper proposes a measure for use specifically among religious communities to assess individual-level social capital. The Williams Religious Social Capital Index (WRSCI) provides a unidimensional construct of religious social capital taking into consideration the four elements highlighted. A sample of 720 members of six cathedral congregations in England and Wales completed a battery of items concerning social capital. Factor analysis procedures produced a 12-item index of religious social capital. Reliability analyses demonstrated that this index achieved satisfactory levels of internal reliability consistency. Construct validity was supported by the clear association between frequency of attendance and levels of assessed religious social capital.

Introduction

Defining social capital

Initial development of social capital theory by Coleman (1988, 1990) defined the construct as a set of relationships that can foster action between two or more people.

As Coleman (1988) states:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible. (S98)

This notion of social capital is based on a micro-level where people make connections with others. A useful addition to the construct was rehearsed by Putnam (2000), with his distinction between bonding social capital and bridging social capital, and later by Woolcock (2001) with his development of linking social capital, as differing forms of relationships that can be fostered by communities.

Bonding social capital refers to the way individuals create close-knit ties with others, while bridging social capital refers to the way in which individuals are able to make more diffuse, often instrumental ties with others (Putnam, 2000). Linking social capital refers to the way in which individuals are able to make ties with those who are from a higher or lower social strata than themselves.

Both Coleman and Putnam also talk about the importance of trust in developing and maintaining social capital. For Coleman (1990), trust can ensure that the relationship will have an outcome that is beneficial for both parties. For Putnam (2000), the social trust displayed for others is of central importance. As he noted, those communities

that have high social trust often have more favourable characteristics such as high employment, low social and economic deprivation, and a higher tendency to help to engender trust and social capital within the community.

An understanding of these four elements of social capital (bonding, bridging, linking and trust being generated in relationships between two or more individuals) enables the researcher to develop a construct that is both conceptually sound and open to empirical measurement. It is on this definition of social capital that the current paper is based. In particular, this paper will be concerned with the study of religious social capital.

Religious social capital

Recent studies in the area of religious social capital have varied in the way in which this form of social capital has been conceptualised and measured. Studies in this area fall into two groups. On the one hand, some studies conceptualise religious social capital in terms of voluntary membership. For example, Lam (2002) analysed the 'God and Society in North America' survey testing for the relationship between religious affiliation and volunteer associational participation. The results demonstrated that membership on a committee of a religious organisation significantly increased the likelihood of membership in a voluntary association ($p < .01$).

Yeung (2004) explored the responses of 1,038 adults in Finland to investigate the relationship between religiosity, volunteering and social capital. The data demonstrated that 96% of those who belong to a church take part in some form of

volunteering. Further, it was demonstrated that churchgoers were more likely to state that they were concerned for elderly people ($p < .01$), immigrants ($p < .001$) and children and youths ($p < .001$).

Lam (2006) explored the relationship between religiosity and voluntary association in 29 countries by drawing on the World Values Survey, leading to a sample of 31,911. The data revealed that being part of a Catholic country was negatively associated with voluntary membership ($p < .001$) thereby indicating that Protestant dominant countries had higher levels of voluntary membership ($p < .001$).

On the other hand, other studies define social capital as part of relationships developed in a community. For example, Cameron (1999) investigated the relationship between religious capital and frequency of attendance at services. Drawing on a sample of 4,548 respondents to the National Survey on Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles conducted in the United Kingdom in 1990 and 1991, the data demonstrated that social capital, operationalised here as the intensity of religious beliefs was related to frequency of church attendance.

Wuthnow (2002) utilised data from 5,603 respondents in the American Religion and Politics survey to investigate further the presence of status-bridging social capital. The data demonstrated that a significant positive relationship, when tested by odds ratios, was present between respondents having a friendship with an elected public official and: age ($p < .001$), being male ($p < .001$), having a high level of education ($p < .001$) and having a leadership role in the church ($p < .001$). The data suggest,

therefore, that a specific group of people are more likely to use opportunities in church to make status-bridging connections.

King and Furrow (2004) explored the relationship between social capital and religion in the moral development of adolescents by drawing on a sample of 937 13- to 19-year-olds in one Los Angeles high school. MANOVA tests demonstrated a positive relationship between social capital and three measures of religiosity: importance of being religious, frequency of church group participation, and the importance of this participation ($p < .01$, partial eta squared = .05).

The importance of the relationship between religiosity and social capital is clearly demonstrated above. However, both sets of studies suffer from difficulties in conceptualisation. For the first set of studies, which define social capital as volunteering, a number of commentators have highlighted the weakness of this form of argument (Portes and Landolt, 1996; Navarro, 2002). For the second set of studies, although their conceptualisation is closer to that developed by Coleman and Putnam, they fall short of measuring all four aspects of social capital highlighted above.

Both sets of studies also experience difficulties in relation to measurement. While the studies presented above represent the growing tendency to employ quantitative methodologies for research studies in the field of social capital, the majority are still only concerned with the presentation of individual items, rather than the development of psychometric scales, as have been developed for use among macro-level studies (for example the Social Capital Assessment Tool: Krishna and Shrader, 1999; Harpham, Grant and Thomas, 2002).

It is against this background that the current paper is set. The intention of the paper is to present the development of a scale that can be used for micro-level studies of social capital among religious groups. The scale will draw upon the conceptualisation of social capital as a relationship between two or more individuals based on trust, which can be defined as being bonding, bridging or linking in nature.

Method

Item construction

A battery of items was generated by the author and critiqued by a pool of establish researchers with both competency in social capital theory and social scientific techniques for the study of religion. Items were debated and modified before being included in the study.

Items

Alongside standard items concerning sex and age, the questionnaire was concerned with the following:

Private prayer was measured on a five-point scale ranging from ‘nearly every day’, to ‘at least once a week’, ‘sometimes’, ‘occasionally’ and ‘never’.

Frequency of attendance to the cathedral was measured on a five-point scale ranging from ‘nearly every week’, to ‘at least once a month’, ‘at least six times a year’, ‘at least once a year’ and ‘never’.

Sample

Members of the congregation in six-cathedrals in England and Wales were invited to complete a questionnaire concerned with their experiences of the cathedral, as part of a larger project (cf. Williams, 2008). Completed questionnaires were returned by 720 participants, 289 males, and 431 females. The majority of the participants were aged 60-years or above (50%), 32% were aged 40- to 59-years, while 12% were aged 20- to 39-years, the remaining 7% were aged 19 or under. Over four-fifths (87%) stated that they regularly attended the cathedral, with 8% stating they were visitors living nearby, 4% stating that they were there on holiday, and 2% stating that they were there on business. In relation to prayer, 56% stated that they prayed every day, while 15% prayed at least once a week, 14% prayed sometimes, 11% occasionally and 3% never prayed.

Results

Exploratory factor analysis, item-rest-of-test correlations and percentage endorsements for the Williams Religious Social Capital Index are presented in Table One. Principal component analysis was applied to the battery of religious social capital items, with factors less than 0.39 being suppressed. Table one presents the factor loadings for the items on the first principal factor. As can be seen, all items load highly with one another.

The item-rest-of-test correlations, also presented in Table One, indicate that the items included in the Williams Religious Social Capital Index have satisfactory levels of inter-item correlations. The WRSCI achieved an alpha of 0.83, well in excess of the threshold of acceptability set by Kline (1993).

- insert Table One about here-

In order to test the construct validity of the Index, ANOVAs were performed to test for the relationship between WRSCI and attendance at public worship. Table two presents the scale scores in relation to attendance at public worship. Those who responded that they attended the cathedral on a daily basis were more likely to record higher scores on the WRSCI than those who reported that they attended the cathedral on at least a monthly basis.

- insert Table Two about here-

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the Williams Religious Social Capital Index (WRSCI) for the micro-level quantitative assessment of religious social capital in religious communities. The WRSCI provides a reliable measure of this definition of religious social capital. Three main conclusions can be drawn from the paper.

First, social capital can be understood as being the possession of individuals, and can be understood in terms of trust, bonding social capital, bridging social capital, and linking social capital. The presence of all four aspects of social capital reflects individuals, and ultimately groups, that are able to make the best use of their human resources for the benefit of themselves, and of the wider community.

Second, social capital has been operationalised in terms of a 12-item index giving place to the four forms of social capital highlighted above. Each item has been created to be clear and accessible. The items presented in the WSRCI cohere to

produce high alpha coefficients, and the scales possess satisfactory internal consistency reliability.

Third, the construct validity supports the theory that those who invest more time into the religious community, that is those who have a higher frequency of attendance, are more likely to record higher scores on the WRSCI. Those who are regular members of the cathedral congregation have more access to bonding, bridging and linking social capital, and are more likely to confirm that their sense of trust has been increased through their involvement in the cathedral.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that the Williams Religious Social Capital Index be employed in future studies of religious communities that will have larger sample sizes.

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Table One Scale properties of the Williams Religious Social Capital Index (WRSCI)

	<i>r</i>	factor	%
<u>Trust</u>			
Being in the cathedral:			
builds up my sense of trust in God	.398	.497	70
builds up my sense of trust in myself	.482	.580	56
builds up my sense of trust in other people	.462	.566	59
<u>Bonding</u>			
Being in the cathedral helps me to make friends	.565	.675	49
I feel close to the cathedral clergy	.495	.597	41
I feel close to the cathedral congregation	.498	.595	45
<u>Bridging</u>			
Being in the cathedral helps me to meet new people	.597	.703	57
Being in the cathedral helps me to contribute to community life	.552	.656	49
I have become friends with people in the cathedral I would otherwise not have met	.366	.472	47
<u>Linking</u>			
Being in the cathedral helps me to establish my place in the community	.468	.580	31
I have met important people through my involvement in the cathedral	.495	.560	30
I have met different community leaders through my involvement in the cathedral	.500	.596	27

Scale Alpha = .83, Mean = 33.28, SD 7.54

Table Two Mean scale scores by attendance at public worship

	Monthly		Daily		f	p<
	M	SD	M	SD		
WRSCI	42.45	16.64	50.30	18.21	14.77	.001