

Social capital and the multicultural challenge: the role of the public library

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Introduction

In international comparison it is only in the Nordic democracies, Canada, and the Netherlands, that a majority of the population today feel that most people can be trusted (Uslaner, 2006; WVS, 2006). Social capital in the form of civic values as generalized trust and norms of reciprocity is the exception globally. This means that trust in their fellow citizens is not what most people experience in their daily lives. However, this does not mean that trusting people are found only in these countries. What it does mean is that the level of social trust varies between countries and within countries.

Even in small protestant northern European nations, we today find communities in the big cities that are dominated by ethnic and racial minorities. This segregation of ethnic groups tends to drive down the level of generalized trust in society. At the same time the level of in-group trust or particularized trust is increased. Race and ethnicity may be of significance, but the variable with the biggest negative impact on generalized trust is inequality. In this paper, I will argue that the public library has a trust building role. Another question is how this is handled in the libraries. The role of the library in creating social capital has not been given great attention in the literature, and its role in generating trust between ethnic groups has been even less studied. Even so, examples exist. The sparse literature on ethnicity and social capital in the library provide a starting point for further study. Studies where theories on social trust and social capital are developed and operationalized are necessary to bring out more knowledge of what is happening in the library regarding trust. When more is known about if and how the library contributes in creating social trust, it is possible to discuss in greater detail whether the library really makes a difference in the generation of generalized trust and how this contribution can be

increased. Studying public libraries as trust builders in ethnically diverse communities is discussed in the library and information science context while acknowledging that findings contribute in increasing knowledge on the creation of social capital in general.

2. Theory on the making of social capital and the public library institution

The public library is but one institution related to the formation of social capital (Cox, Swinbourne, Pip, & Laing, 2000; Hillenbrand, 2005a, 2005b; Putnam, Feldstein, & Cohen, 2003; Vårheim, 2006). Social capital means "social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995:67). Social capital is positively correlated with various variables describing individual well-being and health, economic growth, democracy and government efficiency, as well as with lowered crime levels, less drug abuse and fewer teenage pregnancies (Granovetter, 1985; Hutchinson & Vidal, 2004; Putnam, 1993, 2000, 2004; Wakefield & Poland, 2005).

The sources of social capital are in contention between a society-centered perspective and an institution-centered perspective. According to the societal account of social capital generation, social capital is created in voluntary associations and in face-to-face interaction between individuals in small groups (e.g. Putnam, 2000). In the institutional approach, social capital is created by government institutions and in particular by universalistic welfare state policies (Hooghe & Stolle, 2003; Rothstein & Uslaner, forthcoming). Lack of empirical evidence has put the society-centered point of view in serious doubt (Vårheim, 2006).

Therefore the study of how universalistic public service institutions like the public library create social capital becomes theoretically relevant not only within the field of library studies, but also within the cross-disciplinary field of social capital studies. Policies towards increasing trust face big challenges. As a universalistic institution, serving a diverse public, the public library is facing these challenges in its daily operations. The library's appeal to all strands of the population could make it particularly suited for creating trust between diverse groups.

3. Social capital and diversity

Within the literature on social capital and ethnic diversity the dominant finding has been that racial and ethnic heterogeneity lowers social capital (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000, 2002; Coffe & Geys, forthcoming; Costa & Kahn, 2003; Delhey & Newton, 2005). The levels of trust and civic engagement are lower in minority communities. On the other hand, there is research finding that ethnic diversity does not necessarily drive down social trust and actually can increase levels of trust depending on context (Marschall & Stolle, 2004; Uslaner, 2006). Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the most important factor decreasing trust is inequality. Unequal societies are low on generalized trust. The impact of ethnicity is far lower. The effect of context in the form of neighborhood characteristics is higher. Trust is low when neighborhoods are segregated (often the result of inequality), not when they are diverse. It is the segregated distribution of the population that affects generalized trust, not diversity. Segregation means small opportunities for contact between groups. Majority groups feel threatened by unknown ethnic minorities. Thus, in-group trust or particularized trust is strengthened. Much social capital

of this bonding kind combined with low generalized trust (low bridging social capital) can be disastrous, confer the break-up of Yugoslavia: “Isolation of a group within a diverse society, not diversity *per se*, seems to be the biggest threat to trust” (Uslaner, 2006:3). Bridging social capital or generalized trust is important because it brings people that are different together.

Inequality means segregation both in space as well as in mind. In unequal societies, unequal people rarely meet on equal terms, i.e. in non-hierarchical situations. Their children do not go to the same schools, they have different doctors and hospitals and they meet in different clubs. As opposed to segregated neighborhoods, diverse neighborhoods enjoying frequent contact between groups mixed with relative equality can enhance trust. However, we know that racial prejudices are among the more deeply rooted beliefs people have and are not easily changed. This is illustrated in the following argument: If we happen to know a nice person from another group this is mostly attributed to the individual properties of this person and not of the group. The attributes of the individual are not transferred to the group. On the contrary, the fact that Mr. X is such a nice person just underlines how unlucky he is being part of that particular group. Does this mean that the trust gap between ethnic groups cannot be narrowed considering that inequality and racial prejudices are entrenched in institutions that are difficult to move? Despite the huge obstacles standing in the way of trust, there is variation in the depths of ethnic divides and between communities. Although not very well investigated, but aside from anecdotal evidence, research indicates that some types of neighborhoods are more trust creating than others and that generalized trust in fact develops through social interaction in mixed neighborhoods (Marschall & Stolle, 2004).¹

4. How to create trust between groups?

Given that racial and ethnic minorities are segregated into more or less homogenous local communities and the bad climate for grand political designs, solutions that can create contact between people without uprooting neighborhoods, would be very much appreciated, especially since the lowest levels of trust are found in homogenous minority neighborhoods. Contact between people across ethnic divides is one way of creating social capital, but not any form of contact in any context. Context and the nature of contact is important (Marschall & Stolle, 2004). Obviously, for an increase in generalized trust and not only particularized trust, contact must occur in a diverse setting. Contact must also be accompanied by: “equal group status within the situation, common goals; inter-group cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom.” (Pettigrew, 1998:65). This set of conditions is not easy to fulfill.

One way trust can increase in spite of racial and ethnic segregation is by directing strong public policies towards making groups meet. Urban planning initiatives relocating parts of the population would reduce existing polarization of the population. Perhaps a little bit more realistic, policies designed towards avoiding *new* demographic concentrations of ethnic groups could be implemented. An even bigger question is how far one in the medium long run can hope to go along the relocation route. However, to be effective these policies are futile without relative equality between groups. This means that the most effective policy for increasing trust really means reducing inequality.

Research by Rothstein and colleagues indicates that institutions and public policies treating everyone as equals, i.e. universalistic policies and benefits, as opposed to means tested benefits, creates generalized trust (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein & Uslaner, forthcoming). Feedback effects from increased trust increase voter support for universalistic policies again increasing trust. In particular, universal policy instruments in the form of services aimed directly at the individual are effective. Examples of universal services are universal old age pensions, universal child benefits, and library services. As opposed to universalistic benefits, the negative effects for generalized trust created by means-tested benefits includes the strong feelings on the part of the recipients of welfare of being humiliated in the meeting with their benefactors, the street level bureaucrats; an encounter confirming and strengthening the feeling of having inferior status felt by people on welfare, removing any potential for inter-group relations and creating hostility. The fact that the middle classes (and also the rich) through universal public services receive universal benefits makes it easier for the poor to accept welfare benefits with their dignity still in place. The other side of the coin is that the middle classes feel that they get something back from the state for the taxes they pay. This way a universal welfare system is upheld implying that if institutions, policies and services are to be considered just by the different social groupings, they must be fair and perform well.

5. The library as a bridge between community groups

The public library as a service institution in the local community focuses its activity on fulfilling the expressed needs of the end-user of public services and providing the same service

for all. Putnam, Feldstein and Cohen's work on one Chicago branch library tells the story of a public library that explicitly was built to function as a trust building institution between communities (Putnam, Feldstein, & Cohen, 2003). Audunson develops the concept of the library as a low-intensive meeting place (Audunson, 2005). A place where people with different interests and background meet informally. A public space where different kinds of groups, the young and the old, the Pakistani and the Hindu, the Dane and the Muslim, the rich and the poor, are more likely to meet compared to in almost any other context. It is not so much a question whether the library has a universalistic service role, but how the library fulfills this role, and whether the right questions have been asked to tap this role. In a meeting of cultures, one would expect the library to meet the various groups with respect and understanding as well as documents, treating everyone on an equal basis. However, when people have different backgrounds unequal treatment might in the interest of equality. There are two major ways of implementing this policy. One is society oriented making the library a community institution rather than a traditional library, e.g. moving towards a community social welfare institution, a community/recreation center with the librarians as community social workers cooperating closely with the social services and voluntary associations. The other way is institution-oriented focusing on the library as a document provider. Perhaps only the second model is line with the ideal of a universal service provider and able to build trust. The few studies that had been conducted on social capital and libraries clearly point in this direction. People go to the library to find information. By maintaining this core the library can fulfill its universal role and be perceived as a legitimate meeting place for all (Cox, Swinbourne, Pip, & Laing, 2000; Hillenbrand, 2005a, 2005b; Vårheim, 2006).

6. The Public library as generator of social capital among immigrants

Little research has been done on the public library as a social capital making institution. Vårheim (2006) found only 11 articles in peer-reviewed journals in the combined databases of LISA and ISI Web of Science. Of these only two also dealt with race/ethnicity. Both articles focus on how to cater for the information needs of immigrants, and are firmly grounded in the tradition of the library as primarily an information provider. One article concentrates on researching the information needs of immigrants (Canadian data), and finds that first of all, information literacy, literacy of library, is the first step towards their inclusion (Caidi & Allard, 2005). In addition, the author points to the discovery of the library and its safe environment, telling friends about the benefits of the library, and the experience of trust in the library personnel. Next, a call is made for tailoring library services according to the specific needs of immigrants and different immigrant groups. For example, it is recommended that libraries include local community records into their collections including immigrant material.

The second paper more directly studies how public libraries meet immigrants in Denmark libraries, how integration of immigrants can be less painful with public libraries as active players (Elbeshausen & Skov, 2004). The importance of the library is underlined in that it is one of the very few public cultural institutions visited regularly among immigrants. Integration is seen not as a convergence of value systems, but as building multiple points of contact with the majority for minority groups. The article concludes that libraries succeed more in integration if immigrant culture is not made the focal point of library's work with minority groups. The library is most

successful even in integration when its primary focus is upon providing universal services. At least when it comes to integration, it is not obvious at all that focusing on the immigrants' culture of origin is in the interest of the immigrants themselves if integration is the goal. This finding is replicated in other studies of voluntary immigrant associations in Denmark (Togeby, 2004). These associations are regarded as important by the government and receive substantial funding. However, generalized trust is not higher among association members compared to other immigrants. The danger seems to be to make the immigrant into a client with specific needs. This does not mean that the specific information needs of immigrants should not be catered for, but that the library first and foremost must be a point of contact between minority groups and the majority, not a place for the creation of in-group social capital by focusing on the needs of the group as such, but rather on their need for contact with majority groups and other minorities, on bridging social capital, generalized trust.

7. Conclusion

Most studies of public libraries and social capital have concluded that the core services were most important in the creation of social capital (Vårheim, 2006). The trust in the library is grounded in the traditional services related to documents. General community work is not what people expect or want from the library. This finding does not mean that the library is not the place for contact between people within and across race, ethnicity and communities. On the contrary, the library in being a library, i.e., a public information space for all, is one of, perhaps the most open meeting places for people of all categories except perhaps public parks.

Further, in depth studies of the public library as creator of generalized trust for immigrants are needed to have more knowledge about the mechanisms in the generation of social trust in minority communities as well as in other community contexts. However, the library institution, which has the same universalistic foundation regarding its services all over the world, seems to be an extraordinary well-suited object for comparative studies of many aspects of generalized trust.

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Notes

¹ Marschall and Stolle (Marschall & Stolle, 2004) find in their study of Detroit neighborhoods that this is more prevalent among blacks than whites, but modifies the significance of this observation by referring to the fact that whites to a much lesser degree lives in mixed neighborhoods making interaction across ethnic and racial divides less feasible.