Horton, Jared: Social Capital and Intentional Communities in Modern Western Societies

Research Proposal

I plan to take a comprehensive look at why some groups of people choose to live in intentional communities with others in a modern westernized society with a focus on social capital. My research will take a look at three types of social capital (bonding, bridging, and linking) at work in various communities both on and off campus. To do this I will interview four people from four different communities: the president of a fraternity, a monk from the Abbey of the Genesee, a community member from the Folk Art Guild in Naples NY, and a resident of the Geneseo Co-op.

The interviews will each be individually tapered but will revolve around the common topic of social capital.

Intentional Communities: planned residential communities designed from the start to have a high degree of social cohesion and teamwork.

Social Capital: a form of economic and cultural capital in which social networks are central, transactions are marked by reciprocity, trust, and cooperation, and market agents produce goods and services not mainly for themselves, but for a common good. (definition from Wikipedia)

In other words, the focus of the the film will be to identify primarily the social, cultural and economic advantages gained from choosing to live in and be a part of an intentional community.

Link to Video

Scholarly Background

The concept of social capital is a relatively new idea and has been discussed much more in the field of sociology than in anthropology.

"Social Capital" has many different definitions derived from the research of multiple academics, however I used the definition put forth by the Sociologist Robert Putnam, which is the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 2000 67).

In order to break this concept down further and apply it to the model of cohousing or Intentional Communities, I used Maria Laura Ruiu's subdivisions of bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. "Bonding" social capital refers to the supportive network within a community and the advantages and effectiveness of that network. "Bridging" social capital is what allows the network to organize activities and make available spaces both for the use of those within the community and outside of it. And "Linking" social capital refers to when community members as a collective are able to collaborate with outside organizations and the advantages obtained through such collaboration (Ruiu 2015).

Avi Friedman introduces another term into the discussion of social capital by defining "well being" as the "all encompassing term that includes economic, social, spiritual, and health related aspects by a group" (Friedman 2014 119). Her article Social Capital and Integrated Communities (2014) further explores the link between well-developed social capital and a community's creativity, urban growth, and economic performance.

Fran Baum takes a somewhat different perspective on how social capital is viewed and how it functions. She identifies "Bonding" social capital as "horizontal tight knit ties" that bring together individuals or groups with similar demographics and "Linking" social capital as vertical connections that highlight differences in power (Baum 2003 320). Her observation is that while bonding social capital facilitates social cohesion through empathy and commonalities, linking social capital does so by encouraging people to feel a sense of responsibility for those outside of their own bonded group, reducing inequalities (Baum 2003).

However, it is important to understand where this discussion of social capital began and why it has taken root in recent years among sociologists and other social scientists. Robert Putnam, whom I referenced for the original definition of social capital, released the first version of his groundbreaking book Bowling Alone in 1995. This book focuses on the data from Roper Social and Political Trends as well as the DDB Needham Life Style Survey and claims that the United States has experienced a steady decline in its amount of social capital and that this phenomenon could pose a threat to both personal and civic health (Putnam 2000).

This shrinkage of social capital is speculated to be caused by an increasing disconnectedness of individuals from their family, friends, neighbors, and social structures. His analysis of the data shows that social bonds are a predictor of life satisfaction as a whole and also identifies social capital as a strong predictor of crime rates and other measures of so called "neighborhood quality of life" (Putnam 2000).

He also compares different kinds of social capital to more relatable aspects of health and wealth by stating that marriage is the equivalent of doubling or even tripling your income and that not being involved in any social groups at all can be just as dangerous as regularly smoking cigarettes (Putnam 2000).

Although Bowling Alone received criticism due to its apparent lack of pragmatism at the time, the idea that social capital plays a significant role in both individual and civic health has gained momentum in recent years as demonstrated by the articles written by Ruiu and Friedman in 2015 and 2014 respectively. The root cause of Putnam's asserted decrease in social capital, however, remains a subject of debate. There is some speculation that this trend is due to a dramatic increase in entertainment technologies that eliminate the necessity of socialization as a recreational outlet while others argue that external factors such as economic stagnation and political polarization may stimulate more social mistrust.
Still, Putnam's message seems to be that social capital and community-building are things that citizens have agency over on a micro, individual scale and that social mixing and cohesion are greatly influenced by cultural emphasis or a lack thereof.

So, in order to both explore and address this topic on a more qualitative and anthropological scale I have gone out into the community in search of efforts to promote social mixing and social capital on a community level somewhat independent of the institutions of both the town of Geneseo and the University. The subjects in the video represent a diversity of organizations including a fraternity, a cooperative, a monastery, and a commune (outside of the community), and in each interview is discussed various kinds of bonding social capital and linking social capital that work to intentionally integrate the community. This is useful background but it is almost entirely unconnected to your video. It would have been helpful, for example, to note which type(s) of social capital best applies to each of your four case studies.

Written Reflection on Final Video

First, I would like to discuss two elements of the video that, in hindsight, I would have liked to have done differently. One issue is that of filming technique, the entire video was filmed vertically with my tablet because its case acted like a stand giving me a stable video. However, this was obviously not preferable because every viewing format nowadays uses a horizontal widescreen display.

The other issue is that of demographics. Although I achieved some amount of diversity among the intentional communities that I sought out, the individuals that I interviewed still lacked the element of diversity. By this, I mean to point out that all of the interviewees happened to be white men. This was unavoidable for the interviews with the fraternity and the monastery, but in the interviews with the commune and the cooperative I asked for volunteers and both of those that offered were also white men. So whereas this was not intentional, it was, in a sense both unlucky and a bit ironic because in both communities during the time of the interviews there were women preparing dinner. (Ironic because of traditional gender roles and because in both communities individuals take turns preparing dinner implicating timing as the real cause)

And now I would like to give a brief response to the reaction of the scholarly background that calls for the different types of social capital to be applied to the four case studies. In the communities of the fraternity and the monastery exists a certain component of exclusivity that draws

References Cited


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Other Sources


more of an emphasis on "bonding" social capital. In both cases the exclusivity and belonging is what separates "brothers" from people outside of their networks. but it’s also what strengthens the networks and level of trust and cohesion. On the other hand the cooperative operates more as a living situation and is arguably a weaker network with the commune being somewhere in between.

With the small amount of experience I have, though, I would say that this stronger level of "bonding" social capital leads to higher levels of "bridging" and "linking" social capital as the stronger horizontal bonds that strengthen the networks allow the collective to more effectively pool their efforts and resources to allow for more outreach and charity. My speculation is that it is because these communities put more of an emphasis on self-sacrifice (in terms of time and money) in order to be a part of the collective, that they are more stable and operate more efficiently than what could be seen as temporary living situations (such as the commune).

This seems to be the overarching conclusion that I have come to in my study, that networks and societies operate more effectively at the expense of individual agency.

Ok, but no explicit references to course readings or other works (see syllabus)