A conceptual framework of social capital and civil society: The re-emergence of John Dewey

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Summary

Social policies and programs designed to replace a significant share of public social protection programs through the development of social capital at the community level have potentially profound implications for civil society and democracy. The process of increasing social capital is multi-faceted and amorphous, making it difficult to encapsulate under definitive analytical frameworks. In this paper we provide a rationale for using John Dewey’s theory of Social Pragmatism as a framework for analyzing social capital. We argue that this framework is a viable tool for understanding social capital policy strategies that are aimed at building community capacity through collaboration and partnerships.

A primary strategy inherent in current policies aimed at devolving government social insurance, assistance, and service programs is the revitalization of social capital at the community level. Developing social capital as a means of increasing community and individual capacity for addressing social problems is not a new idea. Neither is the concept of social capital as a critical element of civil society and democracy. What is new is the widespread use of social capital as a policy strategy designed to supplement or even replace institutional social welfare which is often politically linked to a decline in community, family, and individual responsibility for social and income support. The theoretical underpinnings of social capital in this context are reflective of sociological, political, anthropological, and economic theories. One congruent theoretical base that is particularly relevant to social capital as a policy strategy is Social Pragmatism.

In this paper we examine the distinctive features of social capital and civil society found in John Dewey’s theory of Social Pragmatism as a framework for analyzing and understanding contemporary efforts at extending social capital and building community capacity to supplement institutional social welfare systems. We argue that Dewey provides a conceptual paradigm that informs social capital as a critical component of social welfare policy and planning related to social protection and democracy. Toward this end, we discuss Dewey’s Social Pragmatism in terms of: 1) pragmatism and meliorism, 2) systematic experimental method and evaluation, and 3) community collaboration and interdependency. First, it is useful to discuss how we are using

1 The Social Pragmatic philosophical movement reflects the work of Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, John Dewey and others that developed a theory of meaning and a theory of truth, grounded in a vision of an adequate human existence. It is characterized by: an emphasis on processes and relations; a naturalistic and evolutionary understanding of human existence; an analysis of intellectual activity as problem-oriented and as benefitting from historically developed methods; and an emphasis on the democratic reconstruction of society through educational and other institutions (Campbell, 1995:14).
the term social capital.

**Social Capital**

The concept of social capital appears in a large body of recent literature, including academic scholarship, government policy papers and legislation, international agency economic and social texts, private foundation documents, and non-government organization publications. Despite the widespread use of the term, variable definitions abound (Boix & Posner, 1998; Foley & Edwards, 1998; Portes, 1998; Wall, Ferrazzi, & Schryer, 1998). Some selected frequently used definitions serve to illustrate this point.

- Social capital is “the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions” (World Bank, 1999).

- “Social capital refers to those stocks of social trust, norms and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems. (Networks) facilitate coordination and communication, and thus create channels through which information about the trustworthiness of other individuals and groups can flow, and be tested and verified” (Civic Practices Network, 2000).

- “...social capital [consists] of two main components: sociocultural milieu and institutional infrastructure. Sociocultural milieu is quite similar to the bonding capital outlined by Putnam. Institutional infrastructure has strong similarities to bridging capital” (Temkin & Rohe, 1997 cited in Gittel & Vidal, 1998:16).

- Social capital is a feature of social relations that contribute to the ability of a society to work together and accomplish its goals (Putnam, 1993).

One implication of these definitions for social policy is that social capital can contribute to reducing welfare dependency by strengthening individual self-sufficiency through services developed and implemented by collaborative community-based groups. Various aspects of social capital are evident in the development of policies aimed at shifting from centralized government responsibility for social welfare to multiple lower levels of government through the process of devolution. Social capital is a critical element of the policy of devolution that is aimed at redefining and restructuring the mix of government and non-government programs, for-profit and not-for-profit agencies, professional and voluntary benefits and services. However, developing social capital and strengthening civil society is not only about restructuring welfare, it is also about reviving the sense of social values, participation and communication (information exchange, discourses, dialogue) that are prerequisites for a viable process of social cohesion and
democracy. An important common thread found in both theory and practical application of social capital is the notion that it is a useful tool for enabling communities, families, and individuals to do more with less institutional support.

Much of the discussion about social capital centers on the development of partnerships and collaboration among nonprofit, government, and business organizations which is an increasingly common practice in the delivery of social services around the world. Acting under the assumption that they can capture resource economies and scale up program effectiveness, organizations of the three sectors join with each other to deliver services and foster community development (social, economic, and political). In complex arrangements, collaboration requires blurring of organization boundaries, relinquishing a measure of autonomy, shared planning and decision making, and allocation of financial resources to others. Even in simpler arrangements, partners in the collaboration must dedicate staff time and other resources to each other, exchange information on a routine basis, and conduct some coordinated planning.

The new interest in social capital as a rational approach to contemporary social policy has led to various attempts to analyze its historical and theoretical roots. Its theoretical bases draw from social network and social resource theories, reflecting the writings of Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman (Wall, Ferrazzi & Schryer, 1998) which have contributed to the notion that social capital is an appropriate policy approach to increase individual and family status, as well as economic position in society.

A related theoretical construct is the use of social capital to foster civic engagement and democratic institutions based on Tocqueville’s 18th century notion of civic virtue which has been given contemporary significance by the observations on modern society in the 1990s by Robert Putnam (1995; see also Boix & Posner, 1998; Portes, 1998). Putnam conceives of social capital as emerging from the group based interactions of people in a community. As people encounter each other through community group participation they build up a community identity, establish community norms, learn to trust each other, and commit to providing benefits for each other. A strong civic consciousness is established that leads to high levels of political participation, responsive government and economic development. Social capital, like financial capital, is a resource that is drawn upon by a community to “purchase” community cohesion. Putnam’s contention that there is a general decline in civic engagement has spurred considerable discussion on social capital with particular emphasis on the need for volunteerism, non-profit social service organizations, and individual involvement in community-based initiatives.

**International Social Capital Initiatives**

Interest in expanding the principles of social capital and civil society in economically developing nations has led to several major international initiatives. For example, the UNESCO Management of Social Transformations (MOST) program which was adopted as the official priority of nations following the Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development. It promotes socio-economic cohesion, ethnic-cultural integration and poverty reduction through “best practices” reflecting many of the common elements related to goals and strategies of partnerships and devolution in industrial countries.

Similarly the European Union’s PHARE grant program established in 1989 to assist
Eastern European social and economic restructuring utilizes elements associated with building social capital, emphasizing the development of democracy through partnerships among social welfare NGOs and local communities. Financial grants from PHARE promote many of the fundamental elements associated with devolution and decentralized capacity building in industrialized nations that are characteristic of social capital.

Another initiative that utilizes processes typical of efforts to build social capital is the International Labour Organization’s *Strategies and Tools against social Exclusion and Poverty (STEP)* program. STEP is designed to promote the expansion of social safety nets, social assistance, and the prevention of poverty. The objective of this program is to improve the use of tax-based transfers for populations that are not traditionally covered through wages and work, such as the informal work sector. Significantly, the intent of this project is to develop ways for these populations to provide their own social welfare through non-conventional means, including family and community-based programs and projects that do not rely on work-related centralized systems.

As a final example, international projects sponsored by the USAID are aimed at promoting broad community-based coalitions of professional associations, civic education groups, women’s rights organizations, business and labor federations, media groups, bar associations, environmental activist groups, and human rights monitoring organizations (USAID, 2000).
John Dewey, Social Pragmatism, and Social Capital

Even a cursory reading of Dewey’s concepts of Social Pragmatism discloses numerous similarities with contemporary social policies aimed at promoting social capital and democracy. Foremost among these are an acceptance that:

- Social conditions can be improved through mutual trust and cooperation;
- Collaborative approaches to social policy are essential for sustainability;
- Effective social policies and programs are the product of experimental methods based on assessment and evaluation (program outcomes); and
- Strong social benefit and education programs are necessary for both social capital and democracy.

Stated somewhat differently, Dewey’s Social Pragmatism involved an approach to social policies and programs that was: 1) structural, 2) flexible, and 3) evaluative. For Dewey, structural refers to programs that address social needs that are not being met and social possibilities that are not being realized. Significantly, he contended that there is no single formula to approaching social problems, as social conditions vary. Indeed, flexibility in approaches to programs is critical for Dewey in that all policy measures should be viewed as experiments to be tested. In turn, this requires ongoing revision and continuous planning.

Another aspect conducive to contemporary definitions of social capital is his conviction that social planning must flow from cooperative goal setting and evaluation based on open dialogue and the free exchange of ideas which help to create suggestions rather than pronouncements (Campbell, 1995). Thus, Dewey argued for conducting systematic inquiry that emphasizes accountability, transparency, and outcome evaluation.

Dewey encouraged society to establish a long-range focus that extends beyond specific issues and problems to the cultivation of dialogue and long-term cooperation. Even in the face of inevitable set-backs in community interaction, he believed that it is necessary to maintain a faith that the process is more important than a given result (Campbell, 1998).

Within this context, we now examine John Dewey’s philosophy of Social Pragmatism as a viable paradigm for informing policy development and program planning in the process of building social capital through increased community capacity based on: 1) pragmatism and meliorism, 2) systematic experimental method and evaluation, and 3) community collaboration and interdependency.

Pragmatism & Meliorism

Central to Social Pragmatism is the assumption that social conditions can be improved under any circumstances. This is a perspective that is not always shared by contemporary exponents of social capital. In fact, various analysts (Putnam, 1995; Temkin & Rohe, 1998) express strong skepticism about the efficacy of building social capital and community capacity where it does not exist and where conditions are not the most favorable (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). Such pessimism conflicts sharply with Dewey’s belief that it is always possible to make things better through community-based initiatives. Indeed, Dewey believed that society has an innate tendency towards improvement and that this tendency can be fostered through conscientious human effort. This is embodied in the concept of meliorism. “Meliorism is the belief that the
specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively

Because better social policy does not just happen, a melioristic attitude in
planning is a necessary pre-condition. According to Campbell (1996:261):

Meliorism thus encourages intelligent action, which pessimism cannot,
and arouses confidence and hopefulness without relaxing us into optimistic
passivity. Only a meliorism can underlie the philosophy of action that allows for
the possibility of reform and progress through human effort. Dewey writes that
“progress is not inevitable, it is up to men as individuals to bring it about. Change
is going to occur anyway, and the problem is the control of change in a given
direction.” Existence presents us with a mixture of goods and evils, with an
evolving process of potential benefit and harm. It is our social task to try and
direct this process collectively toward an increased common good:
“reconstruction in the direction of the good which is indicated by ideal ends, must
take place, if at all, through continued cooperative effort.” Without the hopeful
tone of meliorism, the call to this cooperative inquiry will fall victim to the
laziness of optimism or the paralysis of pessimism.

It was Dewey’s position that “whether or not we have the melioristic faith and courage to
continue this path is up to us—you and me, here and now. This challenge has always been the
core of pragmatism, and it is Dewey’s most enduring message” (Stuhr, 1998:99).

Systematic Experimental Method and Evaluation

As noted, Dewey argued that “intelligence must be understood in terms of inquiry,
experimental action, and its results” (Stuhr, 1998:95). “Inquiry, and the theory of inquiry, were
in Dewey’s view among the most important tools at our disposal for learning to live together in
ways that take into account the constraints of our environing conditions, as well as the full range
of human needs and aspirations” (Hickman, 1998:186). Thus, Campbell (1995) reminds us that
Dewey approached social reconstruction through an experimental method based on rigorous
assessment and evaluation, condemning policies designed to meet social ills of the time as “ideas
improvised for the occasion.” For Dewey, more than improvisation in social planning is
required.

Experimental method is not just messing around nor doing a little of this
and a little of that in the hope that things will improve. On the contrary, it is the
attempt to uncover and rectify our social ills. ... We must recognize, Dewey
maintains, ... that “reforms that deal now with this abuse and now with that
without having a social goal based upon on inclusive plan, differ entirely from
effort at re-forming, in its literal sense, the institutional scheme of things.” The
program that we devise must satisfy social needs that are not being met, and
social possibilities that are not being realized; and the “actual social conditions
and needs suffice to determine the direction political action should take”
(Campbell, 1995).

Moreover, for Dewey there is no panacea, no policy or program that is going to fit all
situations. Indeed, successful social programs are dependent on assessment, planning, and feedback from experiments that fit the local cultural, social, and economic conditions. There can be no general rule or formulae for social policies and programs which are in a constant state of experimentation and revision.

...policies and proposals for social action [should] be treated as working hypotheses, not as programs to be rigidly adhered to and executed. They will be experimental in the sense that they will be entertained subject to constant and well-equipped observation of the consequences they entail when acted upon, and subject to ready and flexible revision in the light of observed consequences (Dewey, 1927:207-208).

Within the context of continually observing experimental policies, he writes that “an immense difference divides the planned society from a continuously planning society.” [Moreover] a social plan must be derived by cooperative evaluation. “The attempt to plan social organization and association without the freest possible play of intelligence contradicts the very idea in social planning” (Campbell, 1995:207-208).

Community Collaboration and Interdependency

Dewey firmly believed in a systemic or “holistic” comprehensive approach to understanding social problems, including the value of seeing individuals as part of an organic whole. He recognized the crucial role that collaboration plays in promoting public and civic interdependency in socially and economically healthy communities. Interdependence and interaction within communities is part of his concept of “radical connection” which is essential to the establishment of a democratic and socially responsible society. He maintained that “associated or joint activity is a condition of the creation of a community. But association itself is physical and organic, while community life is moral” that is sustained emotionally, intellectually, and consciously (Dewey, 1927:151). Education plays a major role in this regard by helping individuals to learn to live more cooperatively and to appreciate their role in the social process that allows them to work together to accomplish tasks that cannot be accomplished individually (Campbell, 1998:39).

Commensurate with his contemporary colleague and social activist, Jane Addams, Dewey saw networking as fundamental to effective communities in a process that involved a constant reweaving of the social fabric (Seigfried, 1999 & 1996). Both Dewey and Addams knew the value of understanding the needs of social service beneficiaries within the context of their social networks. This “person-in-environment” perspective continues to play a prominent role in social work and social welfare education and practice.

Another component of interdependency for Dewey is that of cooperation, which includes: “mutual respect, mutual toleration, give and take, the pooling of experiences.” He argued that the success of a community depends on the process of working together in common cause establishes the necessary foundation for expanding community capacity for economic and social development. Dewey observed that “We may be drawn together to solve our own problems, but it is the togetherness, not the solution, that is the primary result. In our attempts to build and further democratic community, the process of shared activity and values held in common is what
He held a fervent belief in the cooperative problem-solving efforts of an engaged and informed public. He maintained that if a community fails to promote cooperative inquiries then apathy will follow with consequences that are detrimental to community development (Campbell, 1995:230). Moreover, for interaction and cooperation to result in a community, it must be shared action.

There must be cooperation on the part of individuals for addressing the common ills of their common lives and for achieving the common goals which are fashioned wherever there is conjoint activity where consequences are appreciated as good by all singular persons who take part in it and where the realization of the good is such as to effect an energetic desire and effort to sustain it being just because it is a good shared by all, there is in so far a community. This shared activity makes possible the emergence of shared values and thus gives rise to the possibility of a fuller community (Campbell, 1998:33-34).

Dewey was adamant about including marginalized populations in community networks and decision making processes. He saw it as absolutely necessary that all segments of society should be involved and represented. Stuhr (1998:95) paraphrases Dewey by observing that “An economy, a government, or a society, then, is not fully free unless it makes available to all its members the prerequisites of their growth—both their growth as individuals and the growth of the social groups through which they live.”

A recurrent theme in Dewey is his belief in facilitating the expression of ordinary public opinion. He often argued that the political process involved in decision making is “essentially a cooperative undertaking” which should be dependent on persuasion and on the ability to convince and be convinced by reason in ordinary language (Campbell, 1995:200).

**Democracy**

One of the most compelling facets of Dewey’s Social Pragmatism is, as discussed above, that all social sectors and classes should be included in the processes of networking, building social trust, planning, experimentation, and evaluation. When Dewey discussed the principles of networking and building trust embodied in the current terminology of “social capital” he did not differentiate between economic or social sectors of society. He was not arguing for a philosophical or practical approach to addressing social problems for the poor, he was advocating for the strategies required to create and sustain a community-based democracy. That is, the program and policy measures necessary in building social capital are rendered more significant in the role they play as instruments in developing democracy.

Dewey does not make any specific references to the term “social capital” but his descriptions of democracy clearly reflect overlapping, if not interchangeable, characteristics. Of particular relevance within the context of social policy development, is that both democracy and social capital are intrinsically linked through processes that are dependent on mutual respect, mutual toleration, the give and take of ideas, the pooling of experiences, and
social experimentations which enhance community bonds.

As with the other Social Pragmatists, for Dewey the success of the community depends upon cooperative efforts to seek the common good in a democratic way. ... In our attempts to build and further democratic community, the process of developing shared activity and values held in common is what matters. We need to foster, he maintains, the kind of long-term focus that sees beyond particular issues to the cultivation of dialogue and long-term cooperation. We should continue to trust in community life in spite of occasional and even severe setbacks because democracy is a moral ideal. Democracy is ...the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained (Campbell, 1998:40-41).

Significantly, for Dewey, the foundation of a democratic community life is built upon how people interact and communicate. He perceived democracy as a form of moral association instituted in the relations and interactions of the community, establishing a mode of associated living or “conjoint communicated experience”(Pappas, 1998:116). Thus, “democracy must begin at home, and its home is in the neighborly community” which is dependent on close personal interaction (Dewey, 1927:218). Despite their deficiencies and opposing interests, it is the family and community that are the primary agents of nurturing and forming strength of character and intelligence required of a viable democracy.

Dewey recognized, moreover, that communities must address conflicting interests amid often diverse perspectives to problem solving with regard to social issues. He was a strong advocate of the idea that democracy (and social capital) is strengthened by bringing differing perspectives and values out into the open so that the community-at-large can participate in decisions as to how social problems might best be approached at the local level. In this context he stated:
Of course, there are conflicting interests; otherwise there would be no social problems. The problem under discussion is precisely how conflicting claims are to be settled in the interest of the widest possible contribution to the interest of all—or at least of the great majority. The method of democracy—insofar as it is that of organized intelligence—is to bring these conflicts out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised, where they can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests than are represented by either of them separately (Dewey, 1935 cited in Hickman & Alexander, 1998:331).

Dewey was also keenly aware that society benefits from having diverse interests represented in social interaction and dialogue about social problems. Including diversity in the process is required not only to build social trust, but to protect society from establishing privileged social sectors. Engaging in free, honest, and open discourse opens up new ways of approaching common problems and often leads to the discovery of shared interests and values. This promotes social inquiry that allows for an honest evaluation of ideas. It is precisely when such a process is not followed that the prevailing ideas of the privileged become institutionalized (Garrison, 1998:77), thereby weakening social capital.

While participation of all sectors in the community is critical to the process, Dewey recognized that social and economic diversity in a community is often subject to exclusion. If not rejected outright, the involvement of minority perspectives, or the involvement of their representatives, can be discouraged through a variety of means aimed at restricting their views. He stressed, however, that the inclusion of diverse ideas must be viewed as a necessary component of continuous objective inquiry, experimentation, and observation which are fundamental to effective programs and policies (Stuhr, 1998:95).

The theme of social inquiry and experimentation related to a continuous process of mutual intellectual and moral growth of individuals is central to Dewey’s community-based institutions and democracy. In keeping with his focus on learning through social experiments and evaluation, Dewey cites two criteria for assessing the level of democratic development in a society.

The first signifies not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control. The second means not only freer interaction between social groups...but change in social habits–its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse. Dewey’s criteria sanction growth as the all inclusive ideal of any society. Good societies grow by cultivating the growth of good individuals who actively promote the good of others in the community. Democratic ideals, and the means to their realization, are moral, economic, and educational, as well as political (Garrison, 1998:78)
The “growth of good individuals” Dewey suggested is highly associated with the level of their participation in groups in the community. This, in turn, contributes to the creation of a democratic society.

From the standpoint of the individual, it [the democratic idea] consists in having a responsible share of according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and in participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of the groups, it demands liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups (Dewey, 1927:147).

Both individuals and groups have a responsibility to be active participants in their local community. He affirmed strongly that this is an important aspect of the human experience: “To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values” (Dewey, 1927:154).

Towards a Framework

Dewey’s Social Pragmatism provides a useful framework for analyzing the aspects of social capital and civil society that promote democracy. The concepts of meliorism, experimental methods and evaluation, and building community through mutual trust and open association furnish are characteristic of government, non-government, and private foundation initiatives in promoting social capital throughout the world. Most current analysis aimed at policy and program development, however, focuses on a somewhat restricted perspective of social capital as a strategy that primarily emphasizes the economic benefit of increasing community capacity to provide for social services and support systems. The development of social networks and mutual trust, and even democracy, is often presented as a valuable by-product of the economic benefits derived from collaboration. Under Social Pragmatism, the community bonds derived from the process would be seen as equally, if not more important, than a given programmatic outcome. A strong and viable process that encompasses the fundamental principles of Social Pragmatism has more significance because it is likely to endure, while program outcomes will always vary.

What criteria might be included in an analytical framework on social capital based on Dewey’s Social Pragmatism? Such a framework would likely focus on an analysis of three areas of social policy and program process. The criteria outlined in box 1 are meant to be suggestive, as a wide range of supplemental standards of measurement for analysis could be added.
An important aspect of the response to devolving government social welfare programs has been a policy emphasis on social capital as a strategy for improving social services through strengthened community collaboration. This paper attempts to provide a rationale for using John Dewey’s theories of Social Pragmatism as a framework for analyzing social capital and civil society program initiatives. We believe that Dewey provides a theoretically sound conceptual paradigm that informs social capital policy not only as a significant aspect of social welfare program planning and implementation, but as an essential feature of democracy. Of particular value as an analytical tool is consideration of a given social policy in terms of understanding the processes of planning; experimentation and evaluation; and collaboration at the community level.
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