

THE CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL UTILITY OF SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

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Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
ABSTRACT.....	5
STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP	7
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	8
CHAPTER 1: PUBLIC HEALTH INTEREST IN SOCIAL CAPITAL	9
1.1 The emergence of the concept of social capital.....	9
1.2 Rising interest in social capital in public health circles	10
1.3 Reasons for increasing interest in social capital.....	11
1.3.1 Social capital as rhetoric.....	11
1.3.2 Social capital as explanation	12
1.3.3 Social capital in public health practice	15
1.3.4 Social capital indicators	16
1.4 Conclusion.....	19
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY.....	21
2.1 Goal and Objectives	21
2.2 Data collection	22
2.2.1 Review of the literature	22
2.2.2 Interviews with public health researchers and policy makers	23
2.3 Data Analysis.....	26
CHAPTER 3: SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH	29
3.1 An overview of the social capital literature	29
3.2 James Coleman’s concept of social capital.....	33
3.3 Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social capital	38
3.4 Conclusion.....	41

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS	43
Introduction	43
4.1 The utility of social capital for communication	44
4.1.1 The utility of social capital for engaging in macro-level inter-sectoral policy debates.....	44
4.1.2 The utility of social capital for facilitating micro-level communication with communities and individuals	50
4.2 The utility of social capital for explaining the social determinants of health.....	51
4.2.1 For explaining the macro-level relationship between social processes and the health of populations and societies	51
4.2.2 For explaining the micro-level relationships between social processes and the health of individuals and communities.....	58
4.3 The utility of social capital for public health practice	63
4.3.1 For macro-level (population based) programs and policies.....	63
4.3.2 For micro level (local and community based) programs and policies	70
4.4 The utility of social capital for measuring social and health outcomes	72
4.4.1 For the development of macro-level social and/or health indicators	72
4.4.2 For the micro-level collection of qualitative data about social determinants of health	80
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS	85
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE	91
APPENDIX B: INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM	93
BIBLIOGRAPHY	97

Abstract

This thesis evaluates the utility of 'social capital' for public health in four dimensions (communication, explanation, practice and measurement) and at two levels (macro and micro), using interviews with public health workers and a theoretical analysis of social capital. It concludes that the concept is potentially useful for public health but that there are limitations to its utility, arising from the presence of two competing discourses or world views identified in the social capital literature: the rational choice discourse and the political economy discourse.

This thesis argues that although social capital is widely perceived to have rhetorical leverage in macro-level policy debates, its contested meaning draws into question the value of any consensus built on the glossing over of different world views. The concept has no value for communication at the micro level.

The rational choice theory of social capital appears useful for explaining the social determinants of health although it does not adequately account for the power structures which shape and constrain access to social capital, and it undervalues many aspects of social relationships. The political economy approach is more useful in these respects but is far more complex and difficult to quantify. It is unclear whether either of these theories adds much value to the existing literature which social capital tends to eclipse.

The concept has limited value for public health practice, as the dual world views embedded in it can be used to support widely varying policy directions. It is also limited by its inability to describe the dynamics of change or to identify levers for initiating change.

The meaningfulness of social capital indicators is compromised by the reductionism of the rational choice paradigm. The political economy

discourse renders the development of quantitative indicators far more problematic but may be useful for informing qualitative research.

Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of this thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

A preliminary report of the material presented in Chapter 3 was published in the *Health Promotion Journal of Australia*, 1999, Volume 9, No. 3, pp. 183-187.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

The research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the La Trobe University Faculty of Health Sciences Human Ethics Committee.

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