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Much Ado about Social Capital

Bob Edwards, *East Carolina University*
Michael W Foley

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Review: Much Ado about Social Capital

Reviewed Work(s):

_Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community_ by Robert D. Putnam

Bob Edwards; Michael W. Foley


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the causal order wrong. After all, the countries reporting the highest rates of group memberships tend to be the long-standing Western democracies, suggesting there might be a reciprocal relationship between the two (Paxton 1999).

Conclusion

The conclusion to Bowling Alone contains recommendations as to how to renew the spirit of civic obligation in America. It would be churlish to reject any of them out of hand. Who could be against “smart growth” policies to combat urban sprawl or more accommodating workplace practices that would permit working couples to spend more time in their community? But as Putnam is aware, many of these proposals face an uphill battle. How are the banking, construction, and real-estate interests that promote and benefit from suburbanization to be fought without the clout of state and federal government? How likely is it that those talented people who preside over America’s entertainment industry will create new forms of television that draw people out into the community rather than pinning them to their couch? Perhaps this “can do” optimism will strike some sociologists as naïve, but others are sure to be inspired by Putnam’s example and turn their attention to the role of social capital in social life. Bowling Alone, like the De Tocqueville masterpiece upon which it draws, is both a work of science and a work of moral exhortation, both a commentary on its time and a symbol of it.

References


Much Ado about Social Capital

Robert Putnam’s latest, Bowling Alone, is a rhetorical tour de force. Even the sophisticated reader must come away with the sense that, however muddy the notion of social capital on which all of this hinges, surely something troubling has been going on in American society over the last 40 years. Yet the rhetorical triumph comes at considerable cost, both conceptually and methodologically. Putnam is making a case rather than testing a hypothesis, and Bowling Alone suffers from a vague conceptualization of social capital, an overemphasis on individual-level relative to institutional and historical factors, and a frequent blurring of the distinction between correlation and causation.

The book’s focus and criteria for judgment shift throughout as Putnam encounters varying trends. Social capital is overwhelmingly good in Putnam’s estimation, but the sort that connects disparate individuals and communities (“bridging social capital”) is often better,
he says, than that which bonds tight-knit social units together ("bonding social capital"). Appropriately, then, on finding that evangelical churches have bucked the trend of decline experienced by other flavors of Christianity, Putnam counters the good news with the observation that such churches do not do as well at promoting civic engagement as those in decline. But social ties in the workplace, arguably on the rise with the entry of women into the workforce in large numbers since the 1960s, do not count, he argues, because they are not as “intimate” or “enduring” as those in the neighborhood or at church and may even be “instrumental.” So much for Granovetter’s “weak ties,” elsewhere endorsed as an important form of social capital. Similarly, upward membership trends in national level advocacy organizations come in for criticism because such organizations do not bring members together in face-to-face encounters that build social capital, something at which evangelical churches excel.

The last example highlights an important conceptual subtlety in *Bowling Alone*. If we assume that Putnam is interested in social capital because social capital produces civic engagement, understood as active involvement in the public life of the community and the nation, we would be missing the thrust of the new book. In *Bowling Alone* an old ambiguity in Putnam’s well-known argument has been resolved. Civic engagement is not just an indicator of social capital, it *is* social capital. But civic engagement is broadly understood as participation in any sort of association, indeed, even in informal community networks; and it is only one of a long string of synonyms and varieties of social capital. In fact, the conceptions of social capital jiggled about in these pages are breathtaking in their diversity. Even granting that many of the 30 plus synonyms we noted while reading *Bowling Alone* are in fact just different ways of saying the same thing, it is not at all clear that membership in voluntary associations, interpersonal solidarity, assuming that people are honest, entertaining friends in your home, and the willingness of neighbors to hector other people’s children can readily be classified as all the same thing. Late in the book, Putnam endeavors to show why the decline in social capital, documented at such great length in the first 180 pages, should concern us, and argues once again that social capital is good for democracy. But the focus of the book is on social capital and not on the health of democracy per se. That is why, in his discussion of social movements, for instance, Putnam is not at all interested in the ability of movements to push marginalized issues onto the public agenda or to create opportunities for participation in the democratic process. Social movement organizations, however important they may be for public debate and citizen participation, do not count in Putnam’s scheme of things, because they supposedly do not promote social capital, that is, the sorts of face-to-face social ties and (abstract) dispositions like “generalized social trust” and “generalized reciprocity” that are core components of social capital.

*Bowling Alone* evidences a relentlessly individualizing style of analysis. Though its claims touch on our collective social health, and the argument hinges on social relatedness, both evidence and argument turn ever and again to the individual. The most egregious examples come in the attempts to account for the declining memberships and other forms of social involvement that concern the author. When it comes to declining union memberships, Putnam says he has no time to resolve conflicting interpretations, but he finds particularly interesting a study that attributes virtually all the decline in union membership since 1977 to declining demand for unionization on the part of workers. When he considers economic forces, and he does so only under the rubric of pressures of time and money, he looks not at economic restructuring, union bashing, factory closings, or the emptying out of industrial and farming communities, but the feelings of economic distress these and other processes might have provoked.

Though Putnam would be the first to deny it, his rhetoric suggests a zero-sum tradeoff between social capital as a motivating and regulating factor and the sorts of regulation embodied in institutions and laws. In the rush to prove that social capital is important, we lose an appreciation of the ways in which institutionalized monitoring, insurance, and regulation themselves help build cooperation and, yes, even social capital, by producing reliable behaviors and expectations of rule adhesion and reciprocity. The book’s obliviousness to institutions is evident even in the introductory explanation of social capital.
Quoting publicity by the Gold Beach, Oregon, Volunteer Fire Department: "Come to our breakfast, we'll come to your fire," Putnam notes that, while the firefighters seem to be invoking a norm of specific reciprocity, they are really affirming their commitment to generalized reciprocity: they will come to everyone's fire (p. 21). But reciprocity, generalized or specific, has little to do with it, since the firefighters have committed themselves to an institution that is legally obligated to provide equal protection to all, regardless of the personal opinions or passing dispositions of individual firefighters. Law and institution, not internalized norms or social ties, explain the VFD's responsiveness.

If *Bowling Alone* is oblivious to institutions and blind to structural causation, it also shows little appreciation for history. A closer look at the evidence for a decline in social capital presented in the first half of the book reveals that in virtually every instance in which Putnam has been able to document an activity before 1950, current levels, though down by 1960s standards, are no lower than those experienced in the 1930s or 1940s and often much higher than those found at the turn of the last century. Memberships in eight representative national professional associations have certainly fallen, precipitously since 1990, but they are still higher than they were in 1940 or in any year previous. Union membership, as a percentage of the nonagricultural workforce, has fallen from its peak in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but it is higher than it was before the New Deal reforms. Church membership is down according to the Gallup polls, but up according to church records; and church attendance is no lower today than it was in 1942. The PTA saw phenomenal growth from its birth in 1910 until its peak in 1959, and significant decline since then; but its membership today, measured per 100 families with school aged children, is no lower than it was in 1943.

Selective attention to social history is particularly evident when it comes to explaining the patterns observed. The "main culprit" in the search for "who killed civic engagement" (to use Putnam's prosecutorial rhetoric) turns out to be generational turnover, or perhaps more accurately, a generation gone bad, the so-called baby boomers. While a brief social-historical sketch of the life and times of the "long, civic generation," who came of age in the Great Depression and World War II, serves to explain their unusual degree of civic engagement, Putnam grants the baby boomers' self-explanations little more than a passing nod. Even the Gen Xers, who continue the downward trends documented here, get a gentle let off when Putnam declares himself ready to blame not them, but their boomer parents for their lack of civic enthusiasm. The boomers, by contrast, are a sort of *deus ex machina* in Putnam's scheme. While their elders' civic engagement can be explained by the circumstances of wartime mobilization, and the Xers have their parents to blame, the boomers come from nowhere, bringing their own peculiar individualism, cynicism, and apathy to Putnam's demographics and accounting, thereby, for "as much as fifty percent" of the decline in civicism, another synonym for social capital, since the 1960s.

Why should we worry about a decline in social capital? Throughout a seven chapter section of *Bowling Alone*, Putnam presents convincing reasons why many of the things he means by social capital are important to individuals, their neighborhoods and communities, regional economies, and maybe even the nation as a whole. He considers a wide range of research, much of which indicates that social capital, variously defined, has demonstrable benefits in specific contexts. Yet, the grand sweep of Putnam's argument requires social capital to be much more than the important, but context-dependent social resource that it is in the sociological conceptions of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Portes, or the network analyses of Burt or Lin.

To sustain Putnam's argument, social capital must be simultaneously the ties that bind and an all-purpose social lubricant, the national duct tape and WD-40, capable of fixing any social problem. Toward this end, Putnam offers his own series of analyses purporting to show that residents of states with more social capital are healthier, happier, more prosperous, less pugnacious, more tolerant of diversity, live in more productive neighborhoods, enjoy more effective government, and benefit from a more equitable distribution of income. The "social capital index" used in this series of cross-state analyses is constructed by disaggregating, to the state level, survey responses from nationally representative samples of individuals. Before
reading this section of *Bowling Alone* sociologists should reread “Ecological Correlations and the Behavior of Individuals” by Robinson (1950:351–57) and keep it close at hand for the duration. They should also pay attention to the cautions by Tom Smith of NORC about disaggregating General Social Survey data to the state level, as Putnam does in constructing his “social capital index.”

Three themes are worth underlining about the argument in these chapters. First, for Putnam, social capital comes in just three flavors: good, better, and best. Though exceptions are acknowledged, as when he notes Portes and Sensenbrenner’s evidence that tight-knit ethnic enclaves may actually hold people back economically, that does not stop the juggernaut generalization that whatever produces social capital must be good for all of us. Second, the cross-state comparison, and the conclusions based on it, implies that, unlike any other form of capital, social capital is both evenly distributed within macrosocial contexts as large as the states of the United States and equally accessible to all residents of a given state. Third, the index derived to measure social capital in these chapters places Putnam solidly in the civic culture tradition of political science still dominated by Parsonsian structural functionalism.

One example illustrates the pattern of methodological challenges a careful reader must overcome to accept the general thrust of Putnam’s argument. A scatterplot (p. 300) to pique the interest of education policymakers portrays a dramatic positive correlation between the social capital index and SAT scores. States with more social capital have higher SAT scores. This leads Putnam to suggest coyly that North Carolina could achieve educational outcomes as good as those in Connecticut by increasing its presidential election turnout by 50 percent, or by doubling its frequency of club or meeting attendance, or by boosting church attendance by two more times per month (p. 301). The statistical analysis undergirding these curious correlations and tongue-in-cheek policy recommendations accounts for rival explanations by including 12 highly intercorrelated control variables in a multivariate regression of a state level data set that contains at most 50 cases. Putnam quickly goes on to note that he does not mean to imply a “simple, direct, and mechanical” link between these adult behaviors and school performance (p. 301). Indeed!

Are we really facing the “collapse of community” of the title? Has Putnam diagnosed the infectious agent and prescribed the effective therapy to stamp out a genuine “anticivic epidemic” (p. 186) eating away at the foundations of the Republic? Or has this long strange trip, through data on every imaginable indicator of human togetherness dredged from research spanning the good, the bad, and the ugly, been a rhetorical extravagance, buoyed by the fashionable conviction that something must be dreadfully wrong with our society?

We might well ask, given the conceptual and methodological concerns raised here, why all the fuss over *Bowling Alone*? Why the hundreds of thousands of dollars of grant money behind this project? Something more than our persistent fascination with narratives of social decline seems to be at stake in Putnam’s reception. Clearly, the argument presented in *Bowling Alone* strikes a chord among an overwhelmingly neoliberal elite. The source of our discontent, the argument tells us, lies neither in restructuring, nor in globalization, nor in increasing inequality, nor in anything else related to the go-go economy of the 1990s. If social capital is America’s elixir for the twenty-first century, conservatives of all stripes can take heart that its source lies in civil society, in private initiative and individual dispositions, not in public action and governmental regulation. A national remedy of civil society and social capital is clearly consistent with a policy agenda of privatization and devolution. Whether these prescriptions can hold up to genuine social analysis is another question.

**Reference**