

Chapter 44

Studying Social Capital in the New Communitarian Horizon: A Multi-Method Research Strategy

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ABSTRACT

Characterized by the virtualization vs. materialization of the social interaction spaces, current communitarian scenarios set a series of doubts about how new technologies are transforming the ability of humans to associate with others over space and time. This uncertain atmosphere takes our methodological approaches for studying virtual communities to the study of the communitarian environment through the analysis of essential attributes that determine the existence of a community: social capital. This chapter presents a multi-method research strategy that allows the study of the social capital in these hybrid communities, in which the only stable element to perform the analysis is the person, understood as the central node where different social groups converge in physical and virtual interaction nets and where ultimately communitarian feelings are cherished.

INTRODUCTION

The new communitarian landscape, characterized by ongoing convergence between physical and virtual communities, lays out a whole set of restlessness and challenges that build up the uncertainty about how new information and communication technologies are transforming the ability of human association. When faced by the anxiety generated by the transition toward a model of society that is

still in process of configuration, we set out a proposal to study the phenomenon of physical-virtual commentary hybridation through the analysis of an essential attribute which determines the existence of a community: the social capital.

According to sociologist Coleman (1988), an important part of the human capital is the ability of individuals to gather and reach a common goal. For political analyst Fukuyama (1996), social capital is critical not only to an economic life of a community, but also to other aspects of its social existence. Currently, the natural skill

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of cooperation is experiencing a rebirth with the development of virtual communities. Therefore, it is interesting to study the relation among social capital and communitary and individual well-being, in the current communitarian environment. In this chapter we will share a methodological approach that systematically study ability of individuals to interact with each other in physical and virtual communities to attain a common and personal good.

Our approach is based on two essential components that form the concept of social capital: trust (understood as an intrinsic property) and common good (goal, the ultimate “what for”). With these variables we will analyze what Yus (2007) referred to as the era of physical-virtual communitary hybridation, in which physical communities experience a process of increasing virtualization; whereas virtual communities are materializing through encounters in the physical environment. It is worth noting that in this process of communitarian convergence, the person is located as the central node, where different forms of social grouping live together within different interaction nets. Further, to study this phenomenon we designed a multi-method research strategy involving three qualitative and quantitative research techniques: non participant direct observation, in-depth interview and content analysis. The purpose is to gain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon and to reinforce the validity of the obtained results when applying our proposal.

TRUST AND COMMON GOOD, ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS OF THE SOCIAL CAPITAL

Out of three collective goods to study the interaction of human groups: social capital, knowledge capital and communion (Rheingold, 1996, pp. 29-30), we have chosen social capital to study the phenomenon of communitarian physical-virtual convergence that shapes the current communitary

landscape. For Howard Rheingold (1996), the search for collective goods of a group is a way to look for elements that link the isolated individuals in a community. In this sense, we consider that social capital is the collective good that, in first place, determines the existence of the community whether physical or virtual and that it will allow us to establish a relationship between its nature (trust) and its purpose (common good).

The Nature of Social Capital is Trust

According to Galdón (2002), the essential elements that conform a concept are: nature, object and purpose. Based on this scheme, the concept of social capital is comprised of the nature or main attribute that encourages individuals to join to the accomplishment of common objectives is trust (Coleman, 1988). When presenting social capital as a conceptual tool that will help to create a theoretical orientation to explain social action, Coleman suggested the role of trust as the joint element for persons that turns actions to become easier and promotes the common goals. He underlines that in a social system trusting links help to promote reciprocal environment, where the members will fulfill obligations and compromises previously acquired (1988, p. 102). Fukuyama (1996) underlined the transcendence of trust in building democratic societies when establishing a close relationship with the common good. For example, he emphasized that one of the most important lessons from the analysis of economical life is that the well being of a nation, as well as its ability to compete, is conditioned by a sole and penetrating cultural characteristic, i.e. the inherent level of trust in that society (p. 25).

Fukuyama reached this conclusion out of the examination of several histories in which different economical actors supported each other as part of a trust-based community. Reasoning along this line, the community was not formed by explicit rules and norms, but from a series of distinctive characteristics of that society and from reciprocal

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